

God's Love in the Face of Terrorism

With all of the rejoicing surrounding the death of Osama bin Laden, I am prodded to ask whether this is really an appropriate response for a faithful person. I truly understand the sentiment, wanting to rejoice at the elimination of an apparently evil man. Instinctively, I would have a desire for revenge and retaliation if I had a loved one perish when the Twin Towers fell. However, this is clearly not the response desired from us by Jesus.

As people of faith, we sometimes get confused. We recurrently see throughout Hebrew Scripture(The Old Testament) a God who smites evil tribes and nations and rewards God-fearing ones. We forget that God established a new covenant through Jesus that was based on grace and forgiveness, even for one's enemies. Jesus clearly promotes peace and nonviolence through an uncompromising, unconditional love and forgiveness. He teaches us "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). You might think that it was easier for Jesus. He did not have to contend with the likes of Hitler, Saddam Hussein, or Osama bin Laden. The reality is that his world was much worse. In the 1000 years leading up to his birth, the Israelites were pillaged, slaughtered, and placed into slavery by the Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans. Despite being violently oppressed by the Romans, Jesus does not promote the elimination of even one Roman official. In one of the few encounters that Jesus has with a Roman, he heals the servant of a Roman Centurion. His love extended to those who were considered unlovable, including the tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus, the adulterer whom society would have stoned, and the sexually promiscuous Samaritan woman at the well. We see him extend forgiveness to the very people who arrest him, beat him, and nail him to the cross.

We are talking about a love that transcends feelings and emotions. The love that Jesus teaches and models is unconditional. It cannot be earned. Is present during times of joy as well as times of sorrow. It is offered whether behavior is virtuous or shameful. The very nature of God's grace is that there is nothing that we can do to make God love us more and there's nothing we can do to make God love us less. The same love is given to the sinner as the saint. It does not discriminate on the basis of income, education, social status, color, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation. Our prejudices are not God's. His love extends to those we consider unlovable, to those we consider unredeemable. Everyone is equally beloved in the eyes of God. This is taught to us through Jesus' parables such as "The Lost Son" (Luke 15:11-32) and "The Lost Sheep"(Luke 15:1-7). God's forgiveness is infinite; there is no end to the number of times he forgives us. Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive an offender. "Seven times?" he asked, thinking he was being generous. Jesus replied, "not seven times, but seven times seven (other translations seven times seventy)." His point was that our forgiveness should be infinite. We all should be glad God doesn't have a fixed number of times for our forgiveness.

I don't expect us to innately feel the same way that Jesus does. We see a good example of this in the story of Jonah. God asks Jonah to take God's message of forgiveness to the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and was a very wicked city that perpetrated horrific atrocities upon the Israelites. It is not a far stretch to suggest that the Ninevites were comparable, if not worse, than Al Qaeda. Jonah is

quite angry at receiving this request from God. He is not interested in seeking repentance and redemption for the Ninevites, in the same way that most of us do not seek redemption for the leaders of Al Qaeda. Yes, it is incredibly hard for us to comprehend that God's grace extends to everyone, even those we find incorrigible. As humans, we love to condemn those whom we judge as evil, but this is not the way of God. Even the "violent" God of the Old Testament redeemed all who sought his love. Many of the heroes in the Old Testament committed heinous acts. Moses was a murderer and coward, Jacob a liar and thief, and David an adulterer and murderer. Yet they all sought and received God's grace. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." We see this on the cross as Jesus extends his grace to the criminal hanging next to him. We see this again as he forgives those who abandoned, betrayed, and crucified him, "Forgive them father for they know not what they do." The radical nature of God's love and the fact that it is boundless is hard for us to accept. When we think of people like Osama bin Laden, we think of them as truly evil, unrepentant, and deserving of annihilation. However, if Jesus was to approach Osama bin Laden, he would do so with God's grace. If you think otherwise, you are underestimating the power of grace to transform evil into good. If God's love does not extend to everyone, then it extends to nobody, for we all act contrary to God's will. It is just a matter of degree, and none of us has the right to draw a line in the sand saying, "this person deserves God's grace and that person doesn't."

Does this mean that the perpetrators of terror should remain free, interminably committing their atrocities? No, there must be accountability for actions. There are people who should not be allowed to function within our society at large. Working behind the scenes with sophisticated intelligence, we can gradually remove terrorists from our midst. When we do so, we can respond with relief that this person no longer will kill innocent people, but let us not rejoice with great jubilation. Instead, reflect with sadness that a beloved creature of God became so lost that they could commit such evil.

As we encounter evil in the world, let us understand that justice is not achieved through broad violent acts of revenge and retaliation. Our response to terrorism throughout the world should be based upon reason and not fear. Our response should be dictated with respect for tolerance of those who are different than us and the sacredness of human life. We should always seek healing, not retribution. Retributive justice does not bring peace and love into the world. We have seen this form of "justice" with its revenge and retaliation fail in Ireland, Israel/ Palestine, Rwanda, Kashmir, the Balkans, and most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. In each of these cases, violence has increased and innocent lives destroyed. Very much like the Romans in Jesus' day, America routinely pursues a path of peace through power, attempting to impose peace on the world by wielding our mighty military strength. Last year our country alone accounted for 40% of all global arms spending. I truly understand the mentality. I still fondly remember my childhood G.I. Joe paraphernalia and secret James Bond weapons. Even now, I get an adrenaline rush every time I hear Dirty Harry say, "Make my day." There can be no doubt. We have a freewheeling, gunslinger, cowboy mentality in the US. However, as a person of faith I am called to follow a different path, the one that is taught and modeled by Jesus. Let's be perfectly clear. Jesus never asked us to worship him, he asked us to follow him. Either we believe that Jesus' teachings reflect the will of God for the world or we do not. If we do, then we must at least try to pursue a path of love, compassion, forgiveness, peace and nonviolence. That is what he taught and that is how he lived.

Love succeeds where violence has failed. If you do not believe this then read the stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Tutu, and Nelson Mandela (all of whom took their cues from Jesus). When we learn to treat all people, especially those who are different from us, with generosity and tolerance, we will take one step closer to bringing God's Kingdom "on Earth as it is in Heaven" (The Lord's Prayer). Terrorism will disappear only through broad, widespread acts of compassion. People who have their basic needs met and feel loved do not become terrorists. An example of this can be seen in the efforts of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa where 1500 troops have built 52 schools 23 medical facilities and dug 25 water wells. The Horn of Africa includes the easternmost countries of Africa across the Red Sea from the Arabian Peninsula. These countries are home to 90 million Muslims, many of whom are impoverished. It is here that Al Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Maj. Gen. Timothy Gormley, the task force commander, explains their work, "We are in a generational fight for their hearts and minds. We do water projects and build schools that help the poor child in a village and in 20 years that child will remember us." Shashank Bengali of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* writes:

A few days after Christmas, U.S. Army Sgt. first class Adam Reed road into the parched, hungry village of Sankabar with a new present: a new water pump. This month, Reed returned to the village, where elders gleefully showed the soldier from Sidon, Mississippi, what the simple irrigation system had brought: budding green fields of corn, bananas and oranges, the most promising crops in years. "We are coming out of drought because of the pump," Omar Ahmed, a Sankabar elder said. "So we say thank you America. And thank you, Mr. Reed. He is the first guy to give us help."

I guarantee you that no terrorists will emerge from Sankabar. We should be building schools, hospitals, transportation and power infrastructure, and wells and irrigation systems in the impoverished parts of our world. Providing this type of compassionate assistance certainly is more within the spirit of our faith than building bombs. You might think that we do not have the resources for doing this kind of work on a widespread basis, but you would be wrong. The final size of the Department of Defense budget in 2010 was \$680 billion. To date, we have spent \$900 billion on our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The defense budget routinely encompasses 20% of all US spending, or 28% of received tax revenues. The money is already there. It is just a matter of deciding how it will be distributed. The manpower is already there. It is just a matter of deciding how we want them trained. Terrorism will remain in the world until the direction of the wind changes, away from militarism, and toward compassion. As people of faith, let us be strong proponents for this change. Jesus tells us that ultimately our success in this world will be judged not by our power over others, but rather by how well we serve others; not by our might but rather by our compassion.