

The Fine Line Between Justice and Vengeance:

A Christian Response to the Death of Osama bin Laden

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Proverbs 24:17 Luke 6:27-28 Romans 12:17-21 Psalm 58 Psalm 94:1-3, 23
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It was just one week ago that President Barak Obama, in a televised address to the nation, announced, "Tonight I can report to the American people and the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden." The impact of that announcement perhaps makes it one of those occasions that many of us will remember when and where we were when we heard it, just as most of us remember when and where we were when we first heard the news of the horrific terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

President Obama calmly and solemnly told the world, "**Justice had been done.**" For all but misguided bin Laden supporters, that sentiment has been universally experienced this past week.

Justice has indeed been done. And the first reaction of most was one of relief. And yet, I am among a great many people who are also struggling with another initial and honest emotion of this news: **a part of me is glad Osama bin Laden is dead.** That feeling of finding pleasure in his death indicates to me that not only has justice been done, but also **a deep-seated desire for retaliation and vengeance. That makes me uneasy!**

As a Christian I think there is a huge difference, at least on paper, between justice and revenge. Emotionally, however, perhaps that's a finer line. This week's issue of *Time* magazine asked former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, "**So how much does revenge play into people's feelings about the killing of bin Laden?**" Giuliani responded:

People are human. When you take away their loved ones in a brutal way like that, the person who did it is someone you want to see – you want to see vengeance, you want to see retaliation, you want to see satisfaction. Those are all raw, human emotions. And having lived through Sept. 11, you either have all of those emotions or you're living in denial.

Christian leaders around the country also weighed in. Let me share some responses that I found on the Internet, or were emailed to me this week. Pastor Steven Furtick of Elevation Church in Charlotte, NC., tweeted, "I unapologetically celebrate multitudes of people who will have an opportunity to live b/c of this man's death. That is good – THAT is victory."

A similar tweet from Tim Stevens, a pastor at Granger Community Church in Indiana, declared, "Some tweets suggest we should feel guilty being happy about this, but I don't."

Some other Christians were more cautious in their response. Brian McLaren, a leader in what is known as the emergent church movement, stated, "Joyfully celebrating the killing of a killer who joyfully celebrated killing carries an irony that I hope will not be lost on us. Are we learning anything, or simply spinning harder in the cycle of violence?"

The former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow (who was a former classmate of mine in seminary), sent out a blog reflecting upon his response when his seven-year-old daughter asked him, **"Daddy, why are those people cheering that someone was killed?"** He said he wished that he could do what a lot of parents do under similar circumstances by telling her to go ask her pastor. Unfortunately in this case, he was. Bruce wrote, "Intellectually, psychologically and socially, I get why the celebrations took place, but it was clear that I did not agree... When someone is brought to justice after such a heinous act, I simply do not believe that rejoicing as if we just won the World Series is the way to respond. **Relief for the end of one part of a painful story and remembering those lost sure, but not dancing in the streets. I simply think we must be better than that.**"

One more. Mother Kai Ryan is the Rector at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Dallas. I particularly resonate with her response. She writes:

Seeing and hearing the celebrative response to the news of Bin Laden's death, I felt uneasy. My Christian faith standing against my American nationalism, I think. **Christian faith never rests easily with violent vengeance or elation at killing.** Evil must receive a response from the faithful, a courageous and decisive response in order to protect the innocent. Those who must plan and execute the response deserve the prayers and support of the faithful.

At the same time, however, we must guard against individually and collectively handing over our souls to the practices of violence and destruction against which we stand. It is essential that we reflect thoughtfully in such moments, and do not give ourselves over to the tyranny of feelings.

To decide that killing is an absolute good, even the killing of our most dangerous enemies, and to celebrate that killing, is to lose hold on the humility and awe to which our Lord calls us in the face of life and death.

I think all these responses reflect the conundrum that many of us are feeling and facing this week. **There are simply no easy answers as to what a faithful American or Christian response to this killing should be.**

That same conundrum was felt and faced by authors of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as well – after all, they were also human and therefore had to deal with their raw, human emotions as well. Like most folks, I was somewhat familiar **Romans 12:19** that states, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the

wrath of God; for it is written, **‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’**” I decided that I needed to study the issue of vengeance a bit deeper this week.

I was shocked, however, when I looked at a couple of Old Testament **psalms that are actual prayers for vengeance**. (Funny how these passages didn't make the cut in assigned lectionary readings.) These psalms reflect the raw, human emotions that a great many people felt in the aftermath of 9-11. They contain the wish for retribution, the cry for an adversary's annihilation, even rejoicing of the righteous over the death of the wicked. **While they are an honest, initial gut-level response to evil, I would suggest they are not a particularly long-term Christian response.**

Yet, we must not try to whitewash the raw emotions reflected in these psalms, because they are indeed the same emotions that we experience. **Psalm 94** cries out, **“O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?... God will repay them for their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out.”**

Now, whether God actually participates in wiping people out I don't believe is true. Yet it is a cry of frustration that many have felt when those who perpetrate acts of evil and violence seemingly get away with their wickedness.

Upon further study, we learn that the psalmist had a pastoral calling (as opposed to a prophetic calling) to encourage and support the discouraged and hurt in their life as the people of God. **It is very important to note that the psalmist did not summon people to hatred and violent revenge.** Instead, he prayed for the vengeance of the Lord, and in his prayer he taught them that vengeance belongs to God, not us. And vengeance, understood biblically in the Old Testament, is not in the emotion of a hate reaction but in the sphere of legal custom. “Vengeance” was an act to enforce or restore justice where the regular legal processes were not competent or had failed. It was a function of God's rule, with God having the right responsibility to restore the order of things.

Referring to God as a “God of vengeance” and praying to God for vengeance is actually, then, a plea for vindication and justice. **Biblically speaking, seeking the vengeance of God is not the same as pursuing human retaliation and revenge**, which in my opinion is what so many people, including our own government, sought (in addition to justice) after 9-11.

So even with all its obvious frustration, the psalmist's prayer, as with the one in **Psalm 58**, is simply **a vehement passionate plea by the powerless for God's powerful help against the powers of wrong and violence. How many of us haven't prayed a similar prayer on behalf of the oppressed and those faced with prejudice and injustice.**

Again, as previously mentioned, in the context of the entire biblical narrative, the term ‘vengeance’ does not mean vindictive revenge, as many believe. Instead, it refers to an action to do justice and restore order.

Let us remember the words of Gandhi, whose manner and teachings of non-violence emphatically warned, “An eye for an eye makes the eye go blind.” That does not mean, however, that non-retaliation and non-violence condones injustice. For like the psalmists and the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12 there is still a call for God to make things right.

As we process our own emotions of this past week, let us also take heed of the warning found in **Proverbs 24:17**, **“Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble.” This was a helpful corrective to me this week.**

Added to that are Jesus words as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, "But I say to you that listen, **Love your enemies**, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (**Luke 6:27-28**)

In the sermon I preached the Sunday after the 9-11 attacks in 2001, I closed with the words, "It is my prayer that we proceed not with vengeful hatred but with a God-directed balance of love and justice." **So as Christians, perhaps our final response to bin Laden's death should be deep sadness that his life did not reflect God's intent for the world – a man who was created, like the rest of us, in the image of God, yet through his horrific actions and ideology did not reflect that image.**

As one other email sent out this week declared, "Perhaps everyone is right. Perhaps the death of Osama bin Laden has made this world more safe. I do not believe, however, that his death has made this world more beautiful."

What is your response as you seek to walk this fine line between justice and vengeance?

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At this time, may we all rise in body or in spirit and join together in the unison **Prayer For the Reign of Peace** that was released this week as a response from the Theology and Worship Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

All-merciful God, through Jesus you have taught us to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies. In times of violence and fear, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, so that we may not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good.

Help us to see each person in light of the love and grace you have shown us in Christ. Put away the nightmares of terror and awaken us to the dawning of your new creation. Establish among us a future where peace reigns, justice is done with mercy, and all are reconciled.

Amen.



Proverbs 24:17

Do not rejoice when your enemies fall,

and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble.

