



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Third Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

May 8th, 2011

At the St. Francis Day Animal Blessing at the American Cathedral Paris in 2001, two magnificent German Shepherds came up the aisle with their handler, and everyone rose to their feet applauding. Many wept. Jim and Bear, the two oblivious celebrities, were the only French search and rescue team to have been at Ground Zero. I got to bless them and shook those paws that had picked their way through the rubble. Jim and Bear were my most intimate connection to the fallen towers of 9-11. I know that for you, the horror of that day was much closer. I now know that over 150 people from Connecticut families died that day and that while Christ has risen, they are still gone.

We all brought our particular experiences of that day to the news that Osama Ben Laden had finally been found and was dead. We all heard the news through the filter of our own memories and loss. I struggled with this all week, whether or not this could be an Easter sermon. The reason that I feel compelled to talk about that this morning is that there are few things more human than the grief and outrage that we have felt for ten years. There are also few things for which we need our faith more than to find peace and comfort and redemption in such times. The Christian faith offers great hope; but it also challenges us and so as I have read and listened all week, the thing that I have heard most consistently is conflict. Conflict between our sense that some measure of justice has finally been done and the sad next thought that it can't bring anyone back. It can't return us to the people we were on September 10th. We still ache and we still need something more.

When I first heard the news on Tuesday morning, it was curious because I couldn't even name what I was feeling. Ultimately, I realized that it was immeasurable sadness, not for the man who had become the face of *enemy* for us but for the sad state of the world and all that had brought us to this day. I stumbled on a Mark Twain quote that kind of summed up what I was feeling, "I've never wished a man dead, but I've read some obituaries with great pleasure." But as I sat there thinking, "yeah, that's it," I knew that there was something else, a bit more reflective, out there waiting to be added to the emotional Cuisinart of the moment. And clear as a bell, although I didn't want it to be, I knew that it was John Donne and a line from his poem, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

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No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
(As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.)
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

It's that "Each man's death diminishes me for I am involved in mankind" line that made clear the ambiguity of the emotions. Nothing was telling me that I should feel bad for him or feel in the slightest bit sorry for him, I knew that I didn't, but something was reminding me that even for all of his evil, I don't get to ex-communicate him from the human race. He wasn't the beginning or the ending of humankind, but he was still a part of it. I also knew that sooner or later I was going to have to listen to Jesus. The space around me got feeling tight, as only Jesus can squeeze you. And just as I knew "each man's death diminishes me" was John Donne's arrow, those from Jesus were more deadly. "Love your enemy" and "forgive." Inside of me was my lesser nature saying "but, I don't want to!"

Forgiveness is a tricky thing. Judaism teaches that only the person wronged can forgive. I can't forgive someone for something that they do to you. That's why on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, people seek out those that they have hurt or wronged in some way during the past year and go and ask for forgiveness. On Yom Kippur, there is an inherent requirement to accept someone's contrition and forgive. Judaism also says that only God can forgive the crime of murder because the one who was wronged is no longer there to forgive. Clearly, this was not about my forgiving Osama bin Laden. I have no standing to forgive him for the many thousands of deaths he had brought about, before and since 9-11. And besides, he was never contrite, in fact, he celebrated his crimes.

Forgiveness is never meant to be a glib, sweeping moment saying that the horrible acts committed are somehow of no consequence and all is forgotten, don't worry about it. Forgiveness isn't, "it's ok" because what he did can't be made ok. What forgiveness is meant to be is the freedom that comes from no longer being shackled to the anger and the desire for revenge. It is being able to say to the Bin Ladens of the world, "I will not allow your hate and your hateful actions to define me and write the script of my life." When we break those chains we say to him "You may have taken something precious but you cannot take from me my ability to love and to hope." "You cannot make me what you have become." Until we can let go of our justifiable anger and hatred, he's still in control, alive or dead.

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Our Christian faith looks like it starts with Christmas and finds full flower on Easter, but it is really centered on Good Friday, when Jesus gave us so much and showed us how to do the hardest thing.

Please hear this. I am not telling you what you have to think or feel. I am not telling anyone to excuse or minimize what he did. My job is to keep Jesus' teaching in our line of sight as we make our way through the minefield of emotions and pain. I know that anger and a desire for vengeance will keep us in that minefield. The goal is to finally make our way out of it.

The most poignant witness to forgiveness came to us in 2006 from the Amish community when five school girls were murdered, others gravely wounded and a community brutalized. The response of the Amish was an unquestioned mobilization of their commitment to forgiveness. They immediately went to the stunned widow of the schoolhouse killer and embraced her. One Amish man sat with the father of the killer and held him for an hour as he wept. They said with word and deed that they would not hold hatred in their hearts nor lay it on anyone else. There were those who disagreed with the Amish community's response saying that it was inappropriate in the absence of remorse and that it made light of evil. While I understand those sentiments, I think they are a misinterpretation of forgiveness.

True forgiveness doesn't wait for remorse but is the willingness to forgo vengeance. Marie Roberts, the wife of the killer, wrote a letter to the Amish community saying, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Such heroic faith and action is designed to stop the spiral of hate and all that it brings. It looks to a better world. One other lesson from the Amish is that it took their whole community, working together to do this. They gently reminded one another of their teachings and helped each other with the pain and emotional conflict. Those five girls are still gone, still missed and their families still mourn. But they have done a great service for us all. They lived out being involved in mankind with grace and poignancy and courage.

May we all find our own moment on the road to Emmaus this morning, an unexpected and unrecognized presence walking with us and teaching us. May this become for us a new day, an Easter morning.

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