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How Shall We Think? What Shall We Do?

1 Peter 2:5 ...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

2 Timothy 1:7 For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

On this Mothers Day, the sermon this morning may not be what you were expecting, and yet I hope it will nonetheless be apt and timely. One of the things that my own mother most instilled in me was my responsibility to try to use the mind that God gave me to think well about things. In that regard, today's sermon asks us to reflect together on how it is that we should and should not think about the death of Osama bin Laden. There can be no doubt that it has been on people's minds this week, and several of you, in fact, have asked me if I might address the topic. And while, again, it may not be what you might have expected for Mothers Day, sometimes life intervenes and, as the great hymn says, "new occasions teach new duties." At the same time, I also believe that this indeed is an appropriate topic for this day because I am recalling that the very first Mothers Day was instituted by Julia Ward Howe - who in 1862 wrote the stirring song "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and who a decade later, and in response to the carnage of the Civil War, founded what would become Mothers Day. Her Mothers Day plea was that we never cease working to find ways to move humanity more towards peace, so that the day might come when no mother ever would have to bury a son (or daughter) killed in battle. That day may not come soon, but as Christians we believe that it WILL come, and we have pledged ourselves to seek even

in our imperfect ways a world that knows more of both justice and peace.

I remember that day nearly ten years ago, when we were living in California, trying to eke out a few more minutes of sleep and then Barbara nudging me and saying “*You need to see this.*” And we watched the smoke pouring from the first World Trade Center Tower thinking that a small plane had had a tragic accident. But then, too suddenly for the eye to follow, a gaping hole and a blast of debris appeared in the second tower and we knew this was no accident. We watched, without words, as the horror unfolded and then the towers dropped to the ground a hundred stories below. And I remember throughout that day wondering “*How do I think about all this? What am I feeling?*” How do I sort out, make sense of, the swirl of horror, anger, fear, rage? And then, almost ten years later, late last Sunday night, upon hearing of the death of the one who had planned that awful day ten years earlier, I found myself asking the very same sort of questions: How do I feel? What am I thinking about this? And perhaps most importantly, how **should** I think about this?

The philosopher Socrates is reputed to have once said that the knowledge that he got as he grew older was precisely the realization of how much he didn't know, and how much he needed therefore other people's perspectives. Such an attitude is very wise, isn't it? Each of us ought indeed to seek out other people to help us think when we are uncertain. That, in fact, is especially the job of the church - to offer us perspectives that can help us answer those questions of “*what do I think, what do I feel, how should I think about the death of Osama bin Laden.*” That has been my experience this week for me as I have struggled to understand my own thoughts and

feelings, and as I struggled to have a word to say to you this morning in response to your questions.

So I went seeking after what others were thinking. One of the first I found came, to my shock, from a fellow minister who posted this on his Facebook page: “*Ding Dong the bastard's dead! Ding Dong the wicked bastard's dead! This preacher is celebrating! We're dancing and shaking our butt[s] [tonight]...*” But that didn’t help me very much, for it reminded me of those scenes ten years ago of those who themselves sang and shouted and gloated at the death of 3000 people in those tumbled towers. I don’t think that that preacher’s words about shaking with joy was the word from the Gospel that I needed, and it didn’t really help me know how to think about what I was feeling.

So I sought further. And I began to come across a remarkable ***convergence of perspectives***. From one evangelical Christian organization came these words:

A nation has a right to defend itself. From the perspective of the fundamental national security of the United States, this action is legitimately... an expression of self-defense. But as Christians, we believe that there can no celebrating, no dancing in the streets, no joy, in relation to the death of Osama bin Laden. In obedience to scripture, there can be no rejoicing when our enemies fall.¹

Another minister, writing in the pages of Christianity Today, one of the most theologically conservative journals you can find, said this:

...we cannot rejoice in the death of the wicked any more than does God (Ezek. 18:23). We may take satisfaction that... justice has been served, but Christians

¹<http://www.newevangelicalpartnership.org/?q=node%2F124>

should display a sober restraint.²

And, at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, a man by the name of Jim Wallis, a man so thoroughly theologically liberal that he has been lambasted by Glen Beck himself, wrote the following:

...Osama bin Laden... was truly an apostle of hate, a dedicated purveyor of violence in response to every grievance, a manipulator and distorter of religion for political purposes, and a man responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. Nevertheless, it is never a Christian response to celebrate the death of any human being, even one so given over to the face of evil.³

These three writers indeed helped me to begin to clarify my own thinking, and it is my hope that my thoughts, tentative and humble as they may be, may also help you in your thinking and feeling about the events of this week. So I offer you the following three reflections:

First, one of the principles we've probably all heard is this: "*Hate the sin, not the sinner.*" And even though it is not in the Bible in quite that form, nonetheless the words of Jesus are quite explicit about not hating our enemies even as we do indeed despise what they do. For make no mistake: we *ought* to despise what Osama bin Laden did. We *ought* to be enraged by the murders of innocents – Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike; men, women, and children – that he proudly presided over for two decades. We

²<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/osama-justice.html?start=2>

³<http://blog.sojo.net/2011/05/02/how-should-we-respond-to-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden>

ought to find damnable his embrace of an ideology of hatred, his sanctioning and encouraging of cowardly violence committed on the bodies of women, his terrible cruelties unleashed on any whom he saw as his enemy. But Christian tradition of every stripe, on the right and on the left, from conservative to liberal, Protestant and Catholic, rightly warns us about hating **any** person, even one whose actions and words were indeed so monstrously vile.

Why? Because, if nothing else, when we hate, we hurt and scar ourselves. What do I mean? Well, I would ask each one of you to reflect honestly, and perhaps painfully, on this question: if you have indeed ever hated someone, didn't there come a point at which the acidity of that emotion actually ate away more of you than the object of your hatred? Didn't your hatred eventually corrode your ability to love, to trust, to take joy in life? Didn't your hatred cause you to do things that made your own life worse, that chipped away at your own values? For you see, to hate someone, *anyone*, will make us less and less able to live the lives God wants for us. So, indeed, hate what Osama bin Laden **did**. But do not hate **him**. Because if you do, he will still have won.

Second, let us join our friends on theological left and right, liberal and conservative, who remind us that we ought not ever celebrate the death of another human being, even one whose deeds were as monstrous as bin Laden's. After all, in the Book of Proverbs we are reminded "Do not gloat when your enemy falls" (Proverbs 24:17), and that indeed, as the prophet Ezekiel says, "God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezekiel 18:32), not even "the death of the wicked...." (Ezekiel 33:11). These words may sound strange to us. And yet they are right: the reason that God

takes no joy in and cannot celebrate the death of even one whose actions were so very vile is that that death represents a failure of God's hopes. There is not a single parent in this room who could ever celebrate the death of one of their children, no matter how awful the things that that child might do. *Why would we think that God would be any different?* And how can we then not try to follow God's lead here? The killing of Osama bin Laden represents, as Presidents Obama, Bush, and Clinton all have said, an act of justice in the face of monstrous crimes. But how much better would this world have been if the awful acts that made that justice necessary had never been unleashed upon the world. But they were – and God mourns what might have been, and grieves that one of His own children went so badly, horribly wrong. That's why God cannot celebrate and neither can we.

Third and finally, the death of Osama bin Laden ought to be the occasion for our renewed resolve to reach out to a hurting world with the good news, to reach out in words and deeds to enact God's compassion and care, to re-focus our lives, our words, our actions, and our giving on what we say is the most important news that we know. In this regard, Warren Larson, himself a conservative Christian, writes these very remarkable words:

...we must bear in mind that bin Laden the billionaire could have spent his life in luxury, but he chose to live in poverty and hardship for a cause, albeit a false one. [For much of his life,] He lived in caves and hideouts and was constantly on the run. We must ask ourselves: Are we as Christians willing to sacrifice for the

cause we say we believe in?⁴

Now let us be clear: his is **not** a call to extremism. Extremism of any stripe inevitably demonizes and dehumanizes. But it *is* a reminder to us that God does ask of us sacrifice. After all, the literal meaning of that word is “to make sacred.” And so I want to answer his question with a resounding “yes!” – that I want to leave this sanctuary this morning resolved to pray to God to help me be better at that kind of sacrificing, that kind of “making sacred.” I want to be even more resolved to put my words, my actions, my money where I say my heart is, where I say my most important belief is. And so, in order to make such sacrifices, in order to “make sacred” in all that I do, then I want to leave here resolved:

Resolved - that when I have a choice between buying one more latte that will leave my stomach warmed and my taste buds sated for a few minutes, or giving that money to ESM or Springs Rescue Mission or Care and Share so that someone whose home is under a bridge can have a blanket, I'll indeed make that very small sacrifice.

Resolved – That when I have the choice between the smug satisfaction of a well-turned sharp word that I know will hurt, or the much more difficult task of seeking to understand and empathize even with those folks who drive me crazy – I'll make the right choice.

Resolved – That when I am tempted to “walk on by on the other side” in the face of folks who make me uncomfortable and yet who also desperately need to know the

⁴<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/mayweb-only/osama-donotgloat.html>

grace that I have known, that I will sacrifice my own comfort to God's expectation of hospitality.

Resolved - That when I am tempted to demonize, write off, dehumanize other folks, when I am tempted to sling slogans at them instead of truly seeking to understand them, I will sacrifice my own narrowness to the greater good of God's ever-widening circle.

Resolved - that when I find myself valuing the status quo more than the hungering neediness of those who are spiritually lost, when I don't want to make the changes to my life that would bring someone to the joy of the Lord, I will find the courage to make the sacrifice of that status quo job number one.

What about you? Are there sacrifices that God is calling you to make on this day so that the love and care and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be even more fully known? For however we end up thinking and feeling about the events of this week just past, our opportunity this morning is to use those events to spur us to be even better Christians this week than we were able to be last week, to put more of ourselves - even sacrificially - in service of the One who leads us now and always. For that opportunity, for that leading, thanks be to God!