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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
May 22, 2011
Acts 7: 55-60

*God of All Ages, in these days filled with war, hunger, and devastation
we ask for your comfort and wisdom. Forgive us for the ways we have become blinded by
our own need for violence-
the ways we create polarity by our own convictions
the ways we demand unanimity between even our own thoughts and feelings.*

*As we breathe a sigh of relief, help us also to breathe your grace.
For, the Way we are called to follow is in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace.
Inspire us to mercy –
mercy for ourselves as we show compassion to ourselves,
mercy for our neighbor as we offer hospitality to their reactions,
mercy for our enemies as we hope for justice and pray for reconciliation.
O great Creator God, breathe your life-breath across this time we are living.
Move in, around, and amongst us.
Amen. *www.searchingforthespirit.wordpress.com*

So, I just want to say from the get-go that it was never my intent to “preach” on the death of Osama Bin Laden. I didn’t think it was necessary to say something about it just for the sake of saying something about it. While you all know I don’t shy away from current events, politics, or controversial subjects in my sermons, it’s not my habit to speak about something just for the sake of speaking about something. Either the Spirit has to move me to do so, or the lectionary reading for the day, in my opinion, necessitates doing so. The basic question for me is, “Does the Word of God, as it comes to us today, warrant taking up a controversial subject?” If so, I think the subject is appropriate. If not, then I don’t think worship is the time or place to take up the subject.

Well, today we heard the story of the stoning of Stephen, and for some reason the death of Osama Bin Laden kept haunting me as I read it, which didn’t make me happy, because my response to the death of Bin Laden wasn’t very Christian-like. I was happy he was dead. I felt some excitement seeing the people gather outside the White House and at the site of Ground Zero. I was proud of my country, and of the Navy SEALs. I think the guy got what he deserved. I don’t fault the people in NYC for celebrating at the site of Ground Zero.

But I didn’t want to tell you any of that, either. So I was quite content avoiding the whole subject. Especially when, on the Monday following his death, the Christians on Facebook started speaking up and against anyone who dared rejoice over the death of Bin Laden, and that made me feel ashamed. And then they had to go and quote the Bible: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus said

that. He also taught us to pray this, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Prayers and litanies asking for forgiveness for **what we** had done started making the rounds on the web. Proverbs 24 was quoted a lot, “Do not rejoice when your enemies fall (it says), and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the Lord will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them.”

Of course, there are Bible verses that say differently. Rick Warren tweeted his response to Bin Laden’s death with Proverbs 21: “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.” Others quoted from Ecclesiastes, “There is a time to love, and a time to hate. There is a time for war, and there is a time for peace.”

But I don’t know that any of that really matters. After all, it’s pretty easy to find a Bible verse to support one’s position on just about anything. But it’s hard to disagree with the fact that Jesus preached non-violence and peace, and to love one’s neighbors and enemies, and was willing to go all the way to the cross to support that position. Being unwilling or unable to do any of that myself is a sin I am willing to confess, and hopefully the good Lord will find the grace to forgive me.

But even that forgiveness does not relieve me, or any of us who profess to follow Christ, from living with the tension of being citizens of this country and citizens of God’s kingdom. And it’s that latter citizenship that gnaws at us, as painful as that might be, to reflect on our own immediate reactions to the death of someone evil like Bin Laden. That latter citizenship also encourages us to reflect on our convictions about peace and justice. What makes for peace? And what makes for justice? Obama said about Bin Laden’s death that “justice has been done”. As a citizen of this country, I agree with that. But as a citizen of God’s kingdom, a statement like that gives me pause. Hence the tension, and the reason why this story of Stephen, and my immediate reaction to Bin Laden’s death, keep haunting me.

You see, the people who stoned Stephen believed with all their hearts that they were justified in doing so. Stephen preached a sermon to them in chapter 6 that really got them riled up. He called them stiff necked and accused them of rejecting Moses. He told them they were forever opposed to the Holy Spirit, and were uncircumcised, i.e. unholy, in their hearts and ears. He accused them of murdering Jesus.

None of which justifies the crowd taking rocks to Stephen’s skull and crushing it.

But the people were so convinced of their correctness, so convinced that they were right and Stephen was wrong, that they couldn’t see past the rocks in their hands. They were so convinced of their own orthodoxy, that killing Stephen became an acceptable response to what he said.

I think this is when the story really began gnawing at me, because I see my own reaction to Bin Laden’s death in the reaction of the crowds, and I know what the crowds did was wrong. But are there ever exceptions to the rule? Since Stephen was a martyr, and Bin Laden a murderer, is violence justified?

In a thoughtful piece in Newsweek Magazine, Elie Wiesel, who knows the atrocities of war firsthand (he is a concentration camp survivor), wrote in response to the scenes of people celebrating Bin Laden's death,

"Normally, I would respond to such scenes with deep apprehension. The execution of a human being—any human being—should never be an event to be celebrated. Death—anyone's—must be taken seriously, thoughtfully.

This time is different. As we listened to President Obama report to the nation and the world the news of bin Laden's capture and death, I, too, shared in the collective response of so many Americans: "He got what he deserved." He committed too many crimes, too many murders—he caused too much suffering—for his death to arouse pity or sadness. By his actions, he gave up any right to human compassion." ("A Death Deserved", Elie Wiesel, Newsweek Magazine, May 2011)

In another thoughtful piece, John Buchanan, publisher of the Christian Century Magazine, told the story of the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a Christian pacifist following World War I. For Niebuhr, pacifism was the only faithful position a Christian could take.

But a decade after the truce to end World War I was signed, Adolf Hitler began to emerge as the leader of Germany, and along with him all of the atrocities in which he believed. Niebuhr was one of the first intellectuals to see the dangers of Nazism. He began to realize that the dangers of pacifist nonresistance were dangerous. And so he changed positions and decided that armed resistance is sometimes the lesser of two evils and sometimes the moral imperative for thoughtful, rational people, even Christian people. He called it "Christian Realism" and said somewhere that the Christian called on to resist evil and fight tyranny does so with a clear conscience but a heavy heart. Christians take up arms, fully aware of the reality of human sinfulness—not only in the aggressor, but in the heart of the defender as well. (*"Grateful, Not Joyful"*, John Buchanan, *Christian Century Magazine*, May 13, 2011)

Honestly, I don't know what the Christian response to Bin Laden's death should be. The only thing I do know is that it is not as black and white as some people make it out to be. . .not entirely wrong, but not an occasion for rejoicing, either.

In all honesty, I think the Vatican said it best in their statement, which reads:

"In the face of a man's death, a Christian never rejoices, but reflects on the serious responsibilities of each person before God and before men, and hopes and works so that every event may be the occasion for the further growth of peace and not of hatred."

I do believe that God can take a negative situation and use it as an opportunity to bring about positive change. It happened in the stoning of Stephen; as horrific as that crime was, Stephen's death introduced Christianity to many areas. Often our times for greatest growth occur during or in response to our greatest struggles. Perhaps Bin Laden's death

will bring about positive change, and not only in the war torn areas of the world but also in ourselves, too.

Before the crowd rushed Stephen they covered their ears. Maybe the positive change we need to make is to uncover our ears and listen to people . . .all people, even those with whom we disagree. Maybe it's as simple as listening to other people, even when what we hear challenges us.

I want to close by telling you something I heard last week that has stuck with me as I've reflected on this story of Stephen and my own struggles and tensions. Last week we attended an Eagle Scout ceremony. You might remember all of the shoes we collected here a few months ago for the young man in Henry's troop who was doing his Eagle project? Well, that young man and his brother received their Eagle Scout awards last week. At the ceremony they recited the Boy Scout Law, which I'd heard before. But this time they recited the meaning behind the law, which I had not heard. Two points of the law have stuck with me this week.

A Scout is **Friendly**.

A Scout is a friend to all. He is a brother to other Scouts. He offers his friendship to people of ***all races and nations***, and ***respects them*** even if their beliefs and customs are different from his own.

And

A Scout is **Reverent**.

A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. ***He respects the beliefs of others.***

Simple. To the point. Worth hearing. Worth repeating. And worth living by, even when doing so causes us tension and gnaws us.

Amen.

God of our silent tears, for nine weary years we have longed for justice for the families of thousands who died on 9/11 at the hands of terrorists. As the world reels with the news of the death of a mass murderer, remind us of these words of Jesus, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you, lest we be tempted to gloat or revile.

Remind us that we are all dust, and remind us that even this man was once a child of his community.

We join the thousands of families affected by terrorism as they mourn anew seeking resolution and consolation.

*We join the world community in prayer for world peace. * Safiyah Fosua*

We look forward to a day when people everywhere will be free to dwell under their own vines and fig trees and study war no more. Amen.