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Giving thanks, asking forgiveness for bin Laden's death

Bill Tammeus | May. 4, 2011 A small c catholic

Just as I brooded about the pernicious life of Osama bin Laden, so have I also been brooding about his recent death.

And what I now understand is that my initial reaction to the news -- in concert with the jubilant reactions of millions of Americans -- needs a harsh, corrective word.

I wish it were otherwise, but I confess that I shared in the joy at the death of this human being. At one level, my joy was quite reasonable and defensible because bin Laden now will be unable to murder or order the murders of any more people, the way he orchestrated the deaths of nearly 3,000 people on 9/11 [1], including my own nephew, a passenger on the first plane to strike the World Trade Center.

I seek -- and feel I need -- no forgiveness for feeling both relief and joy because I acknowledge that happy fact.

But I find it distressing about me and others that whether we actually did it, we felt like dancing in the streets over someone?s death. Indeed, I found the news videos of people celebrating as if this were a sports championship both discordant and disorienting, though revelatory of the human condition.

What I was forced to acknowledge, yet again, is that humanity is so twisted up with sin and suffering that sometimes we come to this -- joy over a bullet to a man?s head.

This joy showed us once again why we cannot save ourselves -- even from ourselves. It showed us why we need a savior, someone who has overcome not just death but also our misplaced elation when it happens to certain people. It reveals again how far outside the mythic gates of Eden we live.

The author of Proverbs 24:17 foresaw this when he wrote [2], ?Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and when he stumbles, let not your heart exult.? (Although in the Psalms and elsewhere I find evidence that others in the Bible paid no attention to this admonition.)

It?s only when, in response to such biblical advice, we ask, ?Why not rejoice?? that we come face to face with our own dissoluteness and our need for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In the Reformed Tradition of Protestant Christianity, where I find my spiritual home, there?s a doctrine called ?The Total Depravity of Humankind [3].? It?s really not as awful as it sounds in that it doesn?t deny that humans are capable of some good. But it does say that we are radically infected by sin and can?t do anything about it by ourselves. Which is why we need a savior.

That?s the condition in which we find ourselves when we watch Americans singing and dancing because members of our military shot someone to death -- though for sure the man they killed had committed profound evil that created terrific wounds in the hearts of families like mine, not to mention the hearts of all Americans.

Life is precious. My faith teaches me that killing anyone, except in self-defense, is not permissible. (Which is one reason I oppose capital punishment.) Even when we kill someone in self-defense -- and I think that shooting bin Laden might be contained within that category -- we dare not celebrate the death.

Perhaps you recall seeing video of some people in the Middle East, especially children, dancing for joy at the news of 9/11. And perhaps you remember how heartsick that made you feel.

I wish everyone who gathered in a flag-waving frenzy in front of the White House and elsewhere at news of bin Laden?s death had remembered that.

Perhaps it might have driven people not into the streets to dance and shout ?USA! USA!? but, rather, to their knees -- to give thanks that a man capable of so much evil no longer can commit it, but also to pray for forgiveness for cheering the death of another human being the way we?d cheer a World Series win.

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