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Who Is the Enemy

Ken Briggs | Apr. 21, 2013 NCR Today

A common threat unites us. But identifying the source of a threat can be hazardous.

At the gym yesterday, the word was that the Boston bombs were the work of "foreign" agents with ties to Al Qaeda or other Islamic militants. There was rage and defiance, not unlike public cries of "no surrender" everywhere it seemed. Boston was akin to 9/11, an attack by forces inimical to America.

Dangerous territory but, with the unstinting aid of the media, a rallying cry of patriotism and heroism.

I wouldn't argue that this outcome has been a deliberate manipulation, though common enemies have been invented to galvanize political schemes in the past (Hitler's use of Jews being only the most egregious in modern times). But it is a weakness we're subject to when our valued interests are imperiled.

So far as anyone yet knows, the two young men involved in the Boston assault were not acting in connection with a wider plot, though evidence could prove that they were.

My roots are near Boston and a friend of the family used to run back and forth to his factory job, 15 miles away, through bitter winters to train for the marathon. Long distance runners remain among the purist of athletes, running for the sheer joy of it rather than pots of gold. So my heart goes out to all those who were wantonly killed or wounded by this act of insanity.

People of means who live on the northeast corridor inevitably receive huge media attention. This incident was covered morning to night. Allusions to 9/11 and the shadowy implications it carried glued the nation's attention.

In the same week, a town of nobodies in Texas was nearly blown off the map by a huge explosion in a fertilizer factory. The cause might be criminal. At last count, the number of dead was four times the total in Boston. They are still searching for victims.

The town's devastation was only a footnote in the news, piggy-backed on the Boston "tragedy" in passing recognition.

It's understandable that people care more about those they regard as their own. Tribal instincts -- economic, racial, political -- are powerful legacies of evolution. But the Gospel summons us to feel for the other person, to reach beyond our own. Those early Jewish Christians were finally impelled by its message to extend the ministry to the gentiles.

My hope is that compassion for the wounded in our own families will heighten our empathy for others. It's an ideal rather than a reality a good deal of the time. Yes, they have come together in Boston but it's a city that for many not so nice reasons has a history of privilege that has relegated non-whites and non-affluent to much misery. Perhaps this terrible incident will bring the whole community to pay attention to the suffering of children caught in wretched schools, tame police violence against minority young people and curb greedy

landlords in place other than the surroundings of MIT and Harvard. We'll see.

The marathon criminals may not represent a larger common enemies, but there are common enemies that receive little to no attention. Poverty covers a lot ot territory but I'd name that as number one -- the causes of it and means to reduce it. A rigged economic system that favors the affluent is another common enemy. As well as racism. And so on.

It's simpler and neater to imagine that our pain and suffering are ours alone or to ascribe them to a force, real or imagined, that is out to get us. It deflects our attention away from those enemies within ourselves and our communities that we could be fighting. We don't know if any other villains were involved in Boston but we do know that, on average, a drone missile kills 10 innocent people.

Many chapters are yet to be written about the Boston blowup, apart from opportunists or hate mongers on all sides, while the diligence of discovering and targeting our most menacing enemies, through the lens of the Gospel, remains urgent.

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