

Forgiving Bin Laden ... and the Governor of Illinois

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It's pretty tempting, after the commemoration of the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001, to make the case--based on Jesus' teaching about forgiving an offender 70-multiplied-by-seven times--that serious Christians ought to figure out how to extend that forgiveness to brother bin Laden and his Al Qaeda accomplices.

The commentators on the passage make it clear that when Jesus answers Peter's question on how many times he needs to forgive a seven-times offending brother (or sister), Jesus really didn't mean, literally, 490 times.

Jesus meant "always" or "as many times as there are offenses against you"--"unendingly" or "without limit."

Unlike the Bush administration, with its policy of capturing, incarcerating and torturing anyone remotely connected with Osama bin Laden and his organization, followers of Jesus are to find a way to imitate God by forgiving the whole bunch from Al Qaeda from the heart.

Jesus is saying that the disciples must teach the people of the nations to be abundantly merciful in dealing with those who commit offenses against them, because God, the fundamental reality in the universe, is abundantly merciful.

As tempting as it is to apply this teaching of Jesus to our relations, as Christians in the United States, with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, there is something we have to wrestle with even closer to home, at least for those of us who live in Illinois.

The governor of Illinois has attacked needy children and their vulnerable families as part of his effort to eliminate \$750 million from the state's budget. He has directed, in order to accomplish his purpose, that budgets be severely cut for the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Human Services and the Department of Healthcare and Family Services--those agencies of state government that help those who need help the most.

In many cases, those to be affected by these actions will be as vulnerable as those who were trapped in the Twin Towers seven years ago. There's virtually nothing they can do by themselves to be spared from injury and, yes, death.

So it's clear beyond any doubt that followers of Jesus have to avoid shrugging their shoulders about this tragedy. They have to resist every temptation to think that this is just the way politics works. Followers of Jesus have to go to bat for these sisters and brothers in need.

We must extend our abundant mercy toward them, not because they have offended us or

anyone else. We must extend our love and care because Jesus also taught us to love and care for anyone who is being treated inhumanely, who is suffering, who requires our assistance. We must extend that mercy as if Jesus himself were the one in need.

So, at the very minimum, we are, as disciples of Jesus, required to be in direct communication with our representatives in the General Assembly about restoring the funding for the proposed cuts.

It would be an act of utter unfaithfulness to stand silent and inactive when we have the power as citizens to demand that our political representatives reverse the governor's dangerous and deadly proposals.

But what about the governor? Are we, as disciples of Jesus in Illinois, to be forgiving of him? Are we to be forgiving of someone who has been given so much power to accomplish good--and has received so much undeserved mercy--who now, when given the chance to be merciful, has chosen to attack those who are most in need?

The teachings of Jesus are clear on this one: we again are to imitate God and find it in our hearts to show mercy to the governor.

And possibly, just maybe, if he sees us as imitating God in our mercy toward him, he too will find it possible to be God-imitating and be, not merciful, but just toward those in need of justice.