

Dear Mom,

Just a quick note to say how much I miss you. Today is our 6<sup>th</sup> Mother's Day apart, but somehow you are still present, and I'm grateful for that.

So, how's the weather up there? I have to be honest, it's kinda sucked around here for the past few weeks. If you could put a word in for us with anyone, we'd appreciate it.

You'd be really proud of the fine young women Anna & Amanda are turning out to be. They remind me a lot of you, and I see you in their faces all the time.

Don't know how much you keep up with the news up there, but it's been a pretty eventful week down here. Osama Bin Laden got killed by some of our soldiers on Sunday night, so that's about all anyone's talking about. Most of us think he probably hasn't shown up where you are, but who knows for sure?

I've had a lot of really ambivalent feelings about the whole thing, and I find myself wishing we could sit together at the condo in Canaan, drinking coffee an hour before everyone else wakes up, and just talking about things the way we used to.

On the one hand, it's hard not to be glad that someone who seemed to be so evil isn't around anymore. It's hard to argue that the world isn't at least a little bit better off now that he's gone.

I also feel like I want to be really proud of all the brave men & women who make such huge sacrifices to protect our safety & well being, and who are risking so much on our behalf. You know I'm not a big fan of killing & violence & war, but I can't fault people who are following their calling and following their orders, and I know that somehow we're all much safer because of their efforts.

That brings me to the other hand, though. Because as sure as I am that we're better off without this guy, and as thankful as I am for the people who protect us against him & his goons, there seems to be a lot of celebrating over it that I just can't quite understand. Especially among

Christians. There's a lot of talk around here about Justice being served by all this. But somehow to me it doesn't seem like real justice, like the kind of justice Jesus talks about. It seems like revenge, but not like justice.

I was reading the book of Micah this week, and that passage in Micah 6:8 kept jumping out at me: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

A lot of folks down here are saying that this was justice. Justice for the people who died on 9/11. Justice for the people who made the ultimate sacrifice at war over the past 10 years. Justice for the people who may live now that Bin Laden is dead. And it's hard to argue with that.

But it seems to me that when God talks about justice it's always tied up with mercy. Mercy for the poor, for the downtrodden, mercy for the hungry and the sick and the prisoners and the marginalized. Mercy for the victims of violence, not the perpetrators of it.

I'm not sure where I see the mercy here.

As I'm sure you know, we just celebrated Easter a couple of weeks ago. I'm assuming that's a pretty big deal where you are! But I look at all of this, and I see Jesus hanging on the cross, putting an end to the centuries-old practice of responding to violence with more violence, and I think, "But that's what exactly we're celebrating. On the surface we may be celebrating the death of an evil man, but evil hasn't died. We may be celebrating that he can no longer pull the trigger or send the order, but nothing has ended here. Not really. They kill our guys, we kill their guys, they kill more of our guys, we kill more of their guys...where does it all end?" I'm not saying I'd somehow be happier if the guy were still alive, but how can we celebrate what is in essence just a continued escalation of violence? When has killing ever put an end to killing?

Somehow, that just doesn't feel like it has anything to do with what Jesus died for. And it sure doesn't feel like it has anything to do with what he LIVED for. In fact, there's a part of me that wants to say, when we celebrate this man's death, even though he was evil, it is an insult to the

cross of Jesus. Jesus exemplified a kind of extreme, radical, counter-intuitive, counter-cultural brand of love and forgiveness. He lived to teach us how to live that way. And yet we keep on killing, and we keep on calling it “justice.”

And more often than I’d like to admit, we do it in the name of the man who hung on that cross.

It doesn’t feel like justice to me. Where’s the mercy? Where’s the love? Where’s the forgiveness?

I’ve had a lot of very heartfelt conversations with some of my friends about all of this. People with sons in the military. People who know someone who was in one of those buildings on 9/11. I cannot in good conscious sit in my ivory tower and say their feelings are not legitimate, that they shouldn’t be happy about what happened this week. They have every right to see this as justice and to get some sense of closure to the horrible nightmare they’ve been living with for the past decade.

I’ve heard some very loving, caring, sincere people ask some really hard questions. Questions like, “How can we just let someone like that keep killing, keep terrorizing, keep destroying life? How would you respond if someone came into your home and murdered Lorie & the girls? There’s no way you can forgive that. There’s no love big enough to cover that.”

But as hard as those questions are, and knowing full well and being eternally thankful that I’ve never had to face that kind of grief or pain, I want to say, “But there is. There IS a love big enough to cover that. There IS forgiveness even to madmen and murderers. His name is Jesus, and he died on the cross EXACTLY to show THAT kind of love, THAT kind of forgiveness.”

In the days and weeks after the horrific events of 9/11, we all wanted revenge. And to be honest, we all called it justice. We wanted someone to pay for what they had done to us, and we wanted to be damn sure that nobody ever tried anything like that again. And who could blame us? We could not just sit back and not respond to that kind of senseless hate and violence.

But hindsight being what it is, and having had almost a decade to reflect on it, I have to wonder about something. What if, instead of going in with guns blazing and bombs exploding, we had

rushed in with food, with clothing, with medicine, with clean water, with schools? What if we had responded to extreme violence with extreme love?

It seems pretty evident that the folks in Pakistan & Afghanistan did a good job of keeping Bin Laden and his cronies hidden for the past decade. I don't think they did it because they were afraid of him. Maybe that was part of it, but I think they did it more because he fed them, he clothed them, he gave them schools and clean water and medicine. Why wouldn't they be loyal to him? What kind of love did we ever show them?

You see, that's the thing about hatred and violence and evil. As long as we fight hatred and violence with more hatred and violence, hatred and violence win. Evil wins. But we have a weapon evil doesn't possess. We have a weapon against which evil has no defense.

It's love.

Extreme, radical, counter-intuitive, counter-cultural love.

What defense would the terrorists have against that? How can you rally against someone who is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, loving the poor?

Yes, some of them would continue killing people. And it seems stupid that we would just, in essence, offer our throats for the enemy to slit.

But isn't that what Jesus did?

In Matthew Chapter 6, right after he teaches his disciples what we call the Lord's prayer, Jesus says, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

That sounds to me like we can't experience God's forgiveness as long as we keep responding to violence with more violence. It sounds to me like the only way the cross is meaningful is when we practice that kind of radical, extreme forgiveness that Jesus demonstrated.

I don't know, though. It seems like we can't even forgive people when they sit in our pew at church, or play music we don't like, or park in our spot. Maybe it is all just too much to ask.

I wish this was all easier, Mom. I wish it was as black-and-white as a lot of people want to make it. I've read a lot of articles by a lot of Christian leaders who are justifying all this with their spin on the Bible, and part of me wishes I could just accept that and agree with it. I wish I could say in honesty that Bin Laden's sins were worse than my sins. That what our soldiers did, they did as an instrument of God's justice. That America has a morally superior stance because we stood up against this evil man and removed him forever from the face of the earth.

But I can't. I can't claim any moral high ground. I may not be a murderer or a terrorist, but in God's eyes I am as depraved a sinner as any radical killer or rapist or suicide bomber. If Jesus' blood is enough to cover my sins, it's enough to cover theirs too. It's GOT to be. Just because I accept it and they don't, doesn't give me a right to sink to their level.

The good news of the kingdom of God can't just be for me or people who agree with me. It's got to be for everyone. If it's not good news for everyone, it's not good news for anyone.

I'm hearing a lot of cries this week of, "God Bless America!" And I want to say, "I thought he already HAS blessed America. Have you looked around yourself lately? What blessing could you possibly lack?"

But does he bless us so that we can be instruments of violence and revenge, or so that we can be instruments of peace and love? Is the lifestyle we're fighting to protect, our so-called freedom, just a freedom to do whatever we want? To exploit cheap labor in China so we can have iPhones and plasma TVs? To blow the tops off of mountains so we can have cheap electricity? To foul our waters with oil and chemical waste so we can drive our SUVs to our vacation homes where we can relax and escape from the stresses of our six-figure jobs and the curse of a healthy, busy family life? To create menial jobs in farms and fields and construction sites that only foreign workers will take for the wages we're willing to pay, and then try to kick them out or deny them rights because they don't look like us or talk like us?

Or is it so we can use our wealth, our prosperity, our education, our power, our BLESSINGS, to create a better world? To do like Jesus said in that prayer, and seek God's will ON EARTH as it is in Heaven? To be free to love and forgive and create Shalom in this messed up, depraved world we've created for ourselves, because we trust ourselves more than the God who created us all?

What's a blessing if you don't do something with it?

We're doing our 30-Hour Famine next weekend with the youth group and the kids from the Baptist church, and we're asking our congregations to fast for hunger and poverty. I hope people will do it. I hope they will see the opportunity to enact some real justice, the kind of justice Jesus lived and died for. I hope their prayer will be for a world where violence and evil can never succeed against the kind of love that Christians show in the world, the kind of good we can do in the world.

I don't know, Mom. I sure wish you were here so we could have that cup of coffee and talk it over. I know you probably wouldn't have any better answers than I do, but you always made me feel better about having the questions.

Guess I'd better wrap this up and let you go. I'm sure Elvis is having a show somewhere you'd like to see. Tell Grandma Kennedy, and Grandma & Grandpa Webb that I love them and miss them and I'll see you all soon.

And please, seriously, see if you can do something about this weather. It's enough with the rain already.

Happy Mother's Day!

Love,

Joe