

FURY AND FORGIVENESS ON THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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I stood in this pulpit 10 years ago, on the first Sunday after September 11, 2001, and tried to imagine describe what we were feeling: grief, anger, fear, sadness, depression, hopelessness. So many had died, so many had been injured and scarred, physically and emotionally. Our nation would never be the same again, it seemed. Our world had forever changed.ⁱ

We're now gathered as a community in this church for a 9/11 commemoration service, and we still have a welter of emotions, not necessarily the same as those we had a decade ago but powerful nonetheless. We've heard two Bible readings from the common Christian lectionary for the week which set out two apparently very different ways we might react to great wrong done to us and to our people: with fury and with forgiveness. The songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodusⁱⁱ describe what's called the glorious triumph of God in destroying the Egyptian army that was pursuing the Jews, who were escaping their long enslavement under the Pharaoh. God is described as sending out his fury, and consuming the offending Egyptians like stubble. In a verse that wasn't read in that same section, God is then literally portrayed as a terrorist as he violently takes away lands of other people further to the north to give to the Jews: "The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia...all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away. Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm...O Lord."ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, we have a gospel reading from Matthew^{iv} where Peter asks Jesus about what to do when he is sinned against by another person. Jesus responds that he must forgive that person -- not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. Earlier in Matthew's gospel account, Jesus has

taught his disciples to pray with the words, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."^v At the end of his life, according to Luke's gospel, in the midst of being tormented, tortured and horrifically killed on the cross, Jesus still has forgiveness on his lips: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."^{vi}

So, the lectionary readings for today leave us suspended between fury and forgiveness as we think about what happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. ten years ago today. I'll bet for many of you neither of those two seems right. But likewise I'll bet many of you also have had moments both of fury and of forgiveness in reaction to the events and aftermath of 9/11. So, what's most appropriate for us to say, feel and affirm on this anniversary date, and how does the biblical tradition help us?

To try to answer those questions, over this last summer I took the opportunity to read more than fifty sermons that were preached within a week of the September 11 attacks in 2001. I found incredibly moving and instructive lessons there, in the freshness of the immediate aftermath, from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist clergy, whose words were assembled in volumes edited by the late Forrest Church, then senior minister of All Souls Church in New York City, and by Will Willimon, then Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. I'd like to share some of the wisdom of those sermons with you today.

First of all, there was and is the overwhelming need of families and friends and the whole nation to mourn the death of the innocent: those on commercial airline flights, in the World Trade Center, and in the Pentagon. Secondly, there was and is the gratitude and praise due all those who heroically stepped immediately into the breach to help with their acts of kindness, valor, and sacrifice: fire fighters, police, medical personnel, emergency workers, and common citizens. Thirdly, it was consistently noted how "an act of terror designed to tear America apart

had instead brought people together"^{vii} We became our best selves as we comforted and looked out for each other across the country, and did it with great gentleness and compassion, often in tears.^{viii} Fourthly there was an international sense of solidarity with Americans in our time of crisis: "We are all Americans now," was heard over and over again from far-flung corners of the globe.

But fury came quickly to the fore as well. The Rev. Bob Jones III stated that "These are wicked, evil people bent on the destruction of America. We should show them no mercy. They have shown the world no mercy."^{ix} The Rev. Todd Lake, Dean of the Chapel at Baylor University, reported speaking to a Christian student on campus the day after the attacks who said that we "Should bomb Afghanistan and turn it into a parking lot."^x At a large service in Florida, the preacher called for "massive and disproportionate retaliation" on any nation that colludes with the terrorists; when the terrorists were caught they should be executed on the spot.^{xi} A *New York Times* survey conducted on Saturday, September 15, 2001, reported that 58 percent of Americans thought we should go after the terrorists even if "thousands and thousands of innocent people are killed in the process."^{xii}

In reading the post 9/11 sermons, I found those of a military chaplain and of a minister who is also a commercial airline pilot particularly poignant. The pilot-minister explained, "I have a personal interest at stake here... I grew up in a military family, attended the Air Force Academy, and flew military aircraft in Southeast Asia. I have never been accused of being a bleeding heart liberal. I've spent twenty-two years in the cockpit of large commercial airliners... When I think of what happened in those airplanes, I have trouble breathing. I can identify completely with those pilots; I know their last thoughts were of complete personal failure, helplessness and despair... But if I allow myself to be consumed with the rage that I feel tugging

at the edge of my psyche, then those madmen who did this will have won. They will have taken from me my power to choose how I look at Life, to choose what I believe about the goodness of Life, and -- in the process -- they will have enlisted me in accelerating this cycle of violence."^{xiii}

The military chaplain, preaching at the U.S. Naval Academy, said, "Meeting these challenges requires something of each of us that is very simple but very costly: to *want* to be like Christ. To want to be like Christ requires us to love our enemies -- all of them. Jesus put it this way: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you' (Luke 6:27-28 NIV). Do you have enemies? Jesus knows what it's like to have enemies; his enemies successfully conspired to murder him."

The pilot-minister explained that responding with love and forgiveness does not deny the requirements of justice: "Do the people who planned this need to be stopped? Yes of course they do. Do they need to be brought to justice and held accountable; do we need to demonstrate to everyone, everywhere, that this behavior is unacceptable in a civilized society? Yes, we need to do that too." But, quoting Jesus in the gospel of Mark, he explained, "What does it matter if we gain the world, if in the process we lose our soul' (Mark 8:36)."^{xiv} A coordinated international police response to find the terrorists and bring them to justice in a court of law would have been quite a different response, I should note, than military intervention in two countries in Asia.

A problem with our religious tradition, though, is that scripture can be quoted in all directions. Here's how two different clergy responded on a nationwide radio show during the week after 9/11, answering the question, "What does your faith say about what we've been through?" The first responded, "As Christians we are trying to follow Jesus, who forgave his enemies and refused to let us defend him." The second clergy person retorted, "I totally disagree

with what your first guest just said. That's terrible! We don't need this sort of wishy-washy forgiveness bit. We need a strong response to these terrorists. That's all they understand."^{xv}

Harvard Divinity School professor and Baptist minister Harvey Cox, speaking to an interfaith breakfast in September of 2001, pointed out that there are many biblical passages that cry out for revenge and slaughter. He could have cited our reading from Exodus this morning, but he used verses from Psalm 137 as his example: "Babylon, Babylon the destroyer/ Happy is he who repays you/ For what you did to us! Happy is he who seizes your babes/ And dashes them against a rock." Note that ancient Babylon is located in what is now Iraq. Cox explained that "West Bank settlers point to passages from the book of Joshua which they maintain command them to 'conquer and settle' regardless of the rights of the Palestinians who live there. Fundamentalist Christians seize upon the flamboyant book of Revelation to sanction apocalyptic savagery." Cox calls these "texts of terror," which all religions have, and "They lie there like dry tinder, and any spark could set them ablaze."^{xvi}

His solution? "Our common task as people of faith today is an urgent one... to locate those circumstances, often created by poverty, resentment, ignorance, and isolation, when texts of spiritual struggle fuel actual violence, to understand the factors that tempt people into using their scriptures to justify hatred and brutality. All traditions share the problem. And the venom erupts both within them and among them. So we must call each other to account and help each other. We cannot do this alone. The era of genteel interfaith circumlocution is over. What we need now is frank interfaith soul-searching."^{xvii}

Father Daniel Murphy is a Catholic priest whose brother was killed in the World Trade Center. As he preached his sermon just days later, he spoke from biblical texts describing God's grace and God's love. "Life is too precious to be consumed by anger and hatred," he declared.

My brother's life is too precious for me to be ruled by anger, hatred, and feelings of deep revenge." Moreover, "History teaches us that revenge builds upon revenge. It never ends." He then went on to counsel, "If you have an American flag outside your house...display it with pride. But not pride in guns, not pride in bombs or high tech weapons of revenge. Let it be a source of pride that we can be a people who respond with love, compassion and healing to end the evil, not only in the terrorists, but the evil and the darkness that exists in every one of us, male and female, young and old."^{xviii} I wonder how Father Murphy feels now about how we did respond, practically speaking, over the last ten years.

A fellow Catholic, Michael Budde, preaching at DePaul University in Chicago that day wished that the clergy at the national prayer service in Washington on September 14 "could have found a list of sins and sinners broad enough to help explain hatred sufficient to drive jetliners into skyscrapers, and deep enough to explain mercenaries now turned against their former paymasters -- for that is the relationship between Bin Laden and the American government." He then made a prediction: "make no mistake, this will be a long war; and September 11 will be a blank check for American ambitions great and petty for the next several decades. Terrorism is a most useful enemy for the powerful... We will see more money for the military and intelligence 'community'... freedom to kill not only the actual perpetrators of violence but also those that might do so in the future (the return of Reagan's 'pre-emptive strike' authorization from the 1980's)." He then challenge the Christian congregation before him: "Without Christians eager to do their patriotic duty, many of the most punishing exercises of American power in the world likely could not have happened... Were churches more serious about Jesus and his disavowal of the sword, the empire might have found its ability to project violence circumscribed if not undermined altogether."^{xix}

So, how do we, practically speaking, follow Jesus after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and after facing new credible threats of terrorism this very day, when we feel suspended between fury and forgiveness? Maybe the first step is to cooperate thoroughly in international police investigation and pursue justice under law as far as we can, before ever turning to military force as a solution. Jesus himself may well have been a pacifist, but for those of us who aren't, we must at least follow just war principles when we consider the use of military force. Historically both within the Christian tradition and international law, those principles have included the following requirements, among others: War may only be pursued only as a last resort after all peaceful alternatives have been exhausted. Only defensive war is permitted, not pre-emptive or offensive war. There must be a clear declaration of war aims. Force must be proportional -- no more than necessary to achieve the declared military objectives. War must be prosecuted with the intention of a better and more just peace and not out of hatred or revenge. There must be no direct and intentional attacks upon civilians, and the utmost must be done to avoid unintentional collateral harm to civilians when attacking military targets.^{xx}

But finally, we can't forget the inner spirit of all that Jesus said and did. The late Rev. Peter Gomes at Harvard's Memorial Church asked in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, "Can it be that compassion is superior to power? Can it be that amid the turmoil of that violent crowd on Good Friday, from his inner strength Jesus showed compassion? He forgave his enemies, he reunited his friends, and he redeemed the criminal."^{xxi} The Rev. Tony Campolo asked at Eastern College Chapel, "Does [Jesus] not say that 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword'? And that 'violence begets violence'? And 'Love your enemies'? Are we going to set that aside simply because it's inconvenient? ...It is time to quote a Jesus who said, 'Blessed are the

peacemakers.' It is not an easy time to say such things. But we will be in the worst of times if we do not remember what Jesus told us."^{xxii} AMEN.

BENEDICTION

May the Love which overcomes all differences,
Which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears,
Which reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us, now and always. AMEN.

Frederick E. Gillis

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- ⁱ Scotty McLennan, "Healing for Lives Touched by Violence," reprinted in Forrest Church, *Restoring Faith: America's Religious Leaders Answer Terror with Hope* (New York: Walker & Co., 2001), pp. 59-65 and William H. Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 139-144.
- ⁱⁱ Exodus 15: 1b-11, 20-21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 15: 14-16.
- ^{iv} Matthew 18: 21-35.
- ^v Matthew 6: 9-13 (in the language of the *Book of Common Prayer*, (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), p. 121.
- ^{vi} Luke 23:34.
- ^{vii} Forrest Church, "Introduction", *Restoring Faith*, p. 1
- ^{viii} Brenda G. Husson, "Lost Sheep, Lost Coins", in Church, *Restoring Faith*, p. 112.
- ^{ix} Bob Jones III, as cited in Helen Lee Turner, "A Day of Terror: Is there a Balm in Gilead," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 178.
- ^x As cited in Todd Lake, "A Christian Response to September 11, 2001," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 10.
- ^{xi} William H. Willimon, "Introduction," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 16.
- ^{xii} ^{xii} As cited in Todd Lake, "A Christian Response to September 11, 2001," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 10.
- ^{xiii} Paul Gonyea, "Who's in Charge Here?", in Church, *Restoring Faith*, pp. 99-100.
- ^{xiv} Luther C. Alexander, Jr., "Been There: Done That." in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 27.
- ^{xv} Willimon, "Introduction," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 7.
- ^{xvi} Harvey Cox, "A Challenge to People of All Faiths," Church, *Restoring Faith*, pp. 162-164.
- ^{xvii} Cox, "A Challenge," p. 165.
- ^{xviii} Daniel W. Murphy, "Brotherly Love," in Church, *Restoring Faith*, pp. 48-51.
- ^{xix} Michael L. Budde, "Putting Away Childish Things," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, pp. 45-48.
- ^{xx} Joseph L. Allen, *War: A Primer for Christians* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2001), pp. 36-47.
- ^{xxi} Peter Gomes, "Outer Turmoil, Inner Strength," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, p. 100.
- ^{xxii} Tony Campolo, "The Best of Times, the Worst of Times," in Willimon, *The Sunday After Tuesday*, pp. 52-53.