

## HEALING FOR LIVES TOUCHED BY VIOLENCE

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Each of us feels, I know, that our lives have been changed dramatically, if not permanently, by the horrendous terrorist violence of last Tuesday. We can't control the feelings that keep coming: grief, anger, fear, sadness and depression and hopelessness. We want to begin some kind of healing process, but how can we? It's too soon. We don't feel safe. There are so many who have died. So many who have been injured and scarred, physically and emotionally. Some of us have lost family members and close friends. It's likely that all of us will be touched personally over the coming days and weeks as we learn of more and more people, whom we know, who have suffered grievous loss. Our nation will never be the same again, it seems. Our world has forever changed.

On Friday I listened to a Stanford law student, choked with grief, as he spoke about how he'd lost his college roommate on one of the planes that plowed into the world trade center. An education school alumnus walked into my office late in the afternoon to tell me about a classmate who died, Vincent Boland. He'd just graduated from the School of Education in June. I returned home in the evening to receive this e-mail from a colleague at Tufts University, where I worked for sixteen years before coming to Stanford earlier this year: "Scotty -- I'm not sure if you have gotten the word, but Janet lost her daughter Mary on American Airlines Flight 11 on Tuesday. Mary was Janet's youngest, and as you probably know, they were inseparable. I hope you didn't have any personal losses amidst this tragedy. God bless."

The Janet my colleague was speaking of -- and I've changed her name to protect her confidentiality -- ran the Conference Bureau for most of my years at Tufts. She was always a wonderful, warm, energetic, optimistic person. Will she ever be the same again?

This is a service of healing for lives touched by violence. How can our Christian faith help us begin the healing process today? For some of us it might come in the powerful music of the Faure Requiem that you'll be hearing throughout the service, or in the hymns we sing together, or in the glorious strains of our organ. For others it may be through prayer or through joining together in the Holy Eucharist. What comfort, though, can we find in this morning's readings from scripture?

Jesus of Nazareth was a healer, and there are many stories of his healings throughout the New Testament. How did he heal? What did it mean when he healed? How can we be helped, through reading scripture, to begin our own healing process today?

Let's look at the gospel lesson from Luke.<sup>1</sup> First of all, we're informed that Jesus was teaching one day, inside a house, surrounded by a huge crowd of people. Some men came -- four men, to be precise, as we're told in the same story in the book of Mark -- carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. We're not informed how he became paralyzed, but we might well imagine today that it was as a result of violence. No doubt he was

physically paralyzed, but we might well imagine ourselves today, paralyzed by grief, or fear for our safety...by depression or hopelessness. The problem, though, was that the four men couldn't maneuver the bed through the crowd and get anywhere near Jesus to ask for healing for their paralyzed friend. But their determination to seek healing was very strong. They managed to get themselves and the bed up onto the roof of the house, they removed a number of tiles, and then they lowered their paralyzed friend on his bed into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

"When Jesus saw their faith" he told the paralyzed man to stand up and walk, which he did, "and went to his home, glorifying God."<sup>2</sup> Please note that the text says that it was because of the four friends' faith that the paralyzed man was healed. Nothing is said about the man's own faith, and Jesus didn't ask him about his religious beliefs, or his background, or whether he was willing to repent for any particular sins. Jesus just healed him on the spot -- no questions asked -- as a result of those four friends coming together, taking determined action in service to another, and having the faith that their friend could indeed be healed through the grace of God.

In a nutshell that's the scriptural message for us today, I believe. Three things are needed for healing to begin for each of us, and in this country at large: First, we need to unite in community, rather than feeling isolated and alone, or in some cases scapegoated and attacked for the color of our skin, our national origin, or our religion. Second, we need to take determined action in service to others, getting up off our haunches, no matter how badly we're feeling, rolling up our sleeves, and going to work to re-build this country and its confidence. Third, we need to have the faith that God will help those who help themselves; we need to have the faith that healing really is possible if we join with others and get moving.

I have a lot of hope for my friend Janet. She always epitomized those three values of community, service to others, and faith in God. On campus she seemed to be constantly thinking of ways to get people together -- to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, to help people get to know each other from one far-flung segment of the campus to another, and simply to build Tufts spirit. She thought big and could organize huge events, seemingly effortlessly. Besides that she had a great sense of humor and made everyone feel great. She knew the value of community.

In terms of service, I'll never forget one summer when there were terrible drought conditions throughout the Midwest, with lots of farm foreclosures and failing agricultural businesses. Janet started thinking hard about what we could do in Boston. As director of the Conference Bureau, she controlled a lot of summer dormitory space. So she offered to team up with Catholic Charities and provide housing for members of farming families who would come to Boston to take summer jobs to help get their mothers and fathers or sisters and brothers over a very hard stretch.

And Janet always maintained a quiet but deep faith in God. When she left Tufts, she went down to Atlanta and started working with Habitat for Humanity. She told me that what made her happiest about Habitat, besides the community-building and service they provided, was their explicit commitment to seeing themselves as a Christian ministry. One didn't have to be embarrassed to talk about God at work, even as she and the organization were careful to be inclusive of all, regardless of their religious background or lack thereof. Janet had faith that all things are possible with God.

I can think of very little that's worse than losing one's beloved daughter to terrorism last Tuesday. "Mary was Janet's youngest," my colleague wrote, "and as you probably know, they were inseparable." I doubt there'll be any healing possible in Janet's life this Sunday. Yet, next week, or next month, or certainly by next year the healing will begin. And it will move into her sinews, and into her bloodstream, and into her heart, and into her very soul. Because I know a community of friends will rally around her in her paralysis. They will lift up the figurative bed on which she is lying, and they will make a determined effort to serve her in whatever way she needs to promote her healing. And since I have an idea of who they are, many of them will act out of their Christian faith that, as the apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>3</sup> As the gospel lesson this morning teaches, it will be by the faith of her friends that Janet's healing progresses.

Yet, I actually think that's only part of the story. Because I bet that Janet will soon be out there herself building community, as she's always done, in response to this national crisis. She'll be comforting others and working to assure that no one is abused because they happen to be Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent. She'll be working to channel her own grief and anger, and that of others, into constructive channels of service rather than into hatred and revenge. And she'll be glorifying and praising God, in whom she lives, and moves and has her being.

It's contagious, this engagement in community, this service to others, and this faith in God. Healing begins with us, though. The paralyzed man would never have been healed in the gospel story if four men hadn't come together and taken determined action, founded in faith, to see that their friend was given the opportunity to be healed. We need to come together, as we have here today. We need to commit ourselves to bold and sustained action to build a better world. And we need to share our faith in a loving and just God.

Now speaking very practically, I have for you some concrete advice, gleaned from various sources over the last week. (It's advice for myself as well, who often finds it rather hard to practice what I preach):

First, in terms of uniting in community, go to City Hall Plaza in Palo Alto at 5 p.m. this evening for an interfaith, mid-peninsula area-wide prayer service.<sup>4</sup> Don't get glued to your TV for more than half an hour a day, and spend any time saved to be with your roommates and friends, or families or colleagues. Eat with other people whenever you can. Hold at least two people a day and let them know they're not alone.<sup>5</sup>

Second, in terms of taking determined action in service to others, decide whatever it is that you wish to experience, and then provide that for another. If you wish to feel that you are safe, for example, cause another to feel that he or she is safe.<sup>6</sup> Make a contribution to the American Red Cross as you leave the church today. Get politically involved, so that you have input into the course of action our nation should take in response to Tuesday's terrorism.

Third, in terms of having faith in God's healing power, remember that all major religions teach the sanctity of human life, and don't let anyone try to justify violence on religious grounds or claim that another religion does so.<sup>7</sup> Take fifteen minutes each morning and fifteen minutes each evening to sit quietly in meditation or prayer; empty

yourself of all the noises and images that have cluttered your consciousness this week, and be still with God.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in the words of the Psalmist, "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait on the Lord."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 5: 17-26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., verse 25.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8: 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Mackey, Convenor, Palo Alto Ministerial Association, e-mail from [PAFCC@aol.com](mailto:PAFCC@aol.com), 9/14/01.

<sup>5</sup> David Batstone, "Batteries Not Included," in SojoNet at <http://www/Sojo.net>, 9/14/01.

<sup>6</sup> Emissary of Light e-mail, 9/11/01.

<sup>7</sup> Announcement by the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, 9/12/01.

<sup>8</sup> Batstone, "Batteries."

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 31: 24.