

Ten Years After

While I was on my Sabbatical, I planned to spend my first several weeks back with you exploring my experiences and what I had learned from them. My travels and reading and prayers over that three months have left me excited about the ways I feel the Spirit moving in my life and about the possibilities for our ministry here together in this place. While I will still be offering these reflections to you and inviting you to join me in opening ourselves to new visions for Good Shepherd, I realized a few weeks ago that this morning would have to be something different. The focus of the media, social networks and casual conversations among friends has increasingly been on the tenth anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. I came to the reluctant conclusion that I would be remiss as your pastor to not pause in my looking forward to take a little time to look back so that together we might continue to make sense of the senseless, to grieve together for the tremendous losses associated with that day, and to offer to God that grief as well as any anger or fear we may continue to feel for the healing power of our merciful God to bless.

It is now ten years after; ten years and a few hours since the Twin Towers fell, since another airliner plowed into the side of the Pentagon, since the passengers of yet another civilian jet sacrificed themselves so that others might be spared. It has been ten years since the most horrific terrorist attack on American soil left nearly 3,000 people dead; 3,000 people who had gone to work or boarded airplanes that morning with no idea that 19 among them were preparing to carry out mass slaughter. In the intervening years, men, women and children in Iraq and Afghanistan have continued to die as a result of the acts of those 19 and of these there is no sure count. The U.S. Department of Defense will admit to some 4500 American military deaths in Iraq and another 1,800 in Afghanistan but this does not include civilian contractors or troops from the other coalition nations. No one knows how many Iraqis and Afghans have died in the wars resulting from 9/11 but independent observers believe that deaths from direct combat, “collateral damage,” and the famines and epidemics that always follow war have reached at least 150,000 in Iraq. There is far less consensus on what has happened in Afghanistan – fewer reporting mechanisms are in place in that rugged and shattered country – but at least 20,000 civilians have died there. This does not, of course, include the number of Americans, Iraqis, Afghans and others who have been crippled, maimed or simply wounded in the war. It has been a bloody decade.

Lest all of these should have died in vain, lest all this blood have been shed senselessly, it is incumbent upon all of the world’s people and especially upon the People of God that we should reflect upon the carnage and ask ourselves and each other what lessons have come from this troubled time. We must judge our own responses and those of our elected representatives not only by holding them up to the wisdom of the world but also to the Scriptural mandates by which we have pledged ourselves to live. We have heard this morning two passages on forgiveness; one from the Old Testament and one from the New and we have read together a passage from the Deuterocanonical book Sirach. How do these and other Scriptures connect with the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, which seem so much a piece of modern times when compared to the centuries old witness of the Bible. What can Joseph and Sirach and Jesus say to us who are in the reality of suicide bombers and armor-piercing bullets, of unmanned drone warfare and campaigns of “shock and awe”?

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Let us first consider the lessons of the past ten years that require no recourse to Divine wisdom. By any measure you care to use, our reactionary wars against Iraq and against the forces of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan have been a disaster. If we were seeking vengeance, then we have gone far beyond what any sane human would consider reasonable with residents of those countries suffering in a ratio of at least 60:1 for each of the victims of 9/11. Meanwhile, the death toll of Americans in the war is twice that of the deaths in the attacks against us. If we were seeking justice, we have failed for it is not justice to hunt down a perpetrator and shoot him on sight without recourse to trial. If we were seeking to make Iraq and Afghanistan “safe for democracy” and to create of them model states for the whole Muslim world, then we have failed for those states are no closer to stability and true democracy than when our former president brashly declared “Mission accomplished,” despite the posturings and pronouncements of the current administration. In our own country, we do not feel safer from possible harm for all the efforts of our military overseas. We need only subject ourselves to the tender mercies of the Transportation Safety Administration at the airport to see the tangible results of our lasting fear or read the headlines about stepped up security in New York and Washington, D.C., this weekend. Additionally, many economists track our current financial crisis to the impact of our “credit card war,” when our war-making expenses shot out of sight even as tax breaks were doled out like candy, meaning that our country paid for our battles with promissory notes. I am once again reminded of the words of that wise warrior Dwight Eisenhower, who said in a speech early in his presidency, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”

In addition to learning the futility and cost of our post-9/11 wars, we have learned something very dark about the American character. Despite the reality that we are the world’s sole remaining military superpower, we have justified our military actions with the excuse that we are victims and further used that excuse to allow an attitude of “whatever it takes” to guide our wartime behavior. The former Vice President of the United States has been quoted as saying that America had to “work the dark side,” using “any means at our disposal” to achieve our goals. The reality behind this rhetoric is deeply disturbing: the use of torture against prisoners of war and the secret “rendition” of prisoners to the custody of other countries so that further torture could not be laid to our account. The degradation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was conducted by members of the United States Armed Forces not some misguided ally or shady subcontractor. Our representatives have chosen a path that most Americans would formerly have associated with Nazi or Japanese Imperial Army atrocities in World War II or with the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” of the North Vietnamese in the 60s and 70s. This latter comparison was made by no less informed a figure than Sen. John McCain, himself a victim of torture at that place. One of the sad lessons of the past decade is that America may no longer claim the moral high ground in the court of world opinion.

But for all the negatives we have learned from a worldly view of the post-9/11 decade, the more important lessons are the positive lessons we can learn from a Scriptural perspective. To begin with, we are called by Scripture to remember that though the world may always and forever seem to be a dangerous place, our Loving Creator is still and always in ultimate control. As that

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old Swedish hymn, “Children of the Heavenly Father,” reminds us, no matter what the situation of life or death, God does not forsake God’s children. The Apostle Paul taught this important idea in his letter to the church in Rome, a passage we often hear at funerals: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” When we fail in this confidence in God’s provision for us and, as Hamlet would say, “take arms against a sea of troubles,” we turn away from our Loving Creator and put our faith in other things. The psalmist proclaimed the foolishness of such a course of action millennia ago: “Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God. They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright.” The prophet Isaiah, whose work we will be studying in “Soup, Salad & Soul” this fall, warned against faith in military strength more directly: “Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!” Our national preoccupation with solving international problems by force of arms is simply a repeat of the path that led Israel and Judah away from the will of the Lord and into destruction and exile. Trust in God who defends us and befriends us is the way in which we should, indeed must, walk. No act of terrorism, no tragedy, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Once we have come to grips with our failures as a nation then we can begin as individuals and as a nation to address those failures. Once we understand that America is in need of the forgiveness of both our Loving Creator and those whom we have injured, then we can learn to accept that forgiveness and to extend it to others. This is the real lesson of the story Jesus told in response to Peter’s query about how often one brother should forgive another. By the way, I am mystified by the translation of Peter’s question offered by our usually excellent New Revised Standard Version. Both the context and the literal Greek indicate that Peter was asking about his brother, not “another member of the church.” The more literal translation actually reminds us that not only fellow Christians may be considered our brothers or sisters in this life. If we replace the servant who is indebted to the king in the story with America and the servant who is indebted to the first servant with the Islamic community, the message becomes clear. For ten years, many Americans and the government that represents us all have been holding all Muslims accountable for the actions of a few – a small debt in comparison with the lives we have wasted in pursuit of our vengeance. Just as Jesus and Sirach taught, just as Joseph acted with his own brothers, America must learn to forgive and be reconciled. For those who already understand this – and I believe that includes all of us here this morning – our task is to take this lesson of forgiveness and proclaim it as widely as we are able, through our words and our actions.

I have given some detail to the failings of our society in the past decade. Let me also offer some stories and words of hope. At a time when Muslims and even those with Muslim-sounding names or who “look like” they might be Muslims are discriminated against in our country in ways large and small, some Christians have stood up to witness to God’s love for all who seek to worship the Creator of All, whether they call on the name God, Adonai or Allah. As reported in the most recent issue of Sojourners, one such witness came from Heartsong Church in the

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suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee. Upon hearing that a local mosque had bought the property across the street from the church for a new building, Heartsong members erected a sign saying, "Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood." When, in the course of things, it became obvious that the building would not be complete before that year's observation of Ramadan, Heartsong opened their doors to the members of the mosque, offering them the use of their building for Ramadan prayers. Not everyone in the church agreed with the action – a few even left the church. But a new and positive relationship was forged between the neighboring communities of faith and the witness of Heartsong Church has had far-reaching repercussions. A group of Muslims in Kashmir, site of so much inter-religious violence in the past and still today, saw CNN's coverage of the story. One of these men went immediately to a nearby Christian church and cleaned it inside and out. They sent a message to Heartsong's pastor, Steve Stone: "We are now trying to be good neighbors, too. Tell your congregation we do not hate them, we love them, and for the rest of our lives we are going to take care of that little church."

That is a dramatic example but the almost miraculous conclusion began with a simple act of brotherly love from a congregation that believed in forgiveness and reconciliation. It is not as if these are new ideas. They are as old as the first generation of the Children of Israel, taught generation after generation by those who were inspired to contribute to our holy writings from Moses to Jesus and by followers of both. Scott Bader-Saye of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest writes: "The church's capacity to respond to an event like 9/11 is formed long before the event in all the small ways we learn to practice patience, love, kindness, compassion and forgiveness. It is these practices we needed on 9/11 to give light in the dusky darkness, and it is these practices we need ten years later to empower our witness for peace and reconciliation." Also writing for The Christian Century, John Paul Lederach, professor of international peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame, says: "If 9/11 changed anything for me, it was to lead me back to the essence of peacebuilding. The profound truth of Jesus' life came home in the form of his simplest yet most radical act: befriending the enemy. To his disciples' consternation, Jesus ate with his enemies and he went to their houses. None of this implied that he changed his fundamental beliefs or values. It implied, rather, that he wanted to build relationships with those deemed untouchable and a threat. He chose love over fear, engagement over isolation and separation."

After lunch, some of us will be headed down to Seattle First Baptist Church for the ordination service of their pastor for children, families and young adults, Ned Allyn Parker. Today is doubly special for Ned because on September 11, 2001, he was on his first shift as a firefighter in Amherst, Massachusetts. He had joined the department with the intention of gaining practical firefighting experience before becoming a fire department chaplain. As he and his new colleagues helplessly watched the repeating coverage of the tragedy unfolding in New York, Ned realized that his chaplain's duties had already begun. As he told the Seattle Times in an article published online yesterday, "On that first shift, he tried to be a compassionate listener, helping firefighters work through their feelings. He didn't talk directly about religion. That would have been difficult, he said, with news accounts indicating all this death, destruction, heartache and pain was the byproduct of religious zealotry." Brother Ned also told the Times reporter how that experience continued to affect his ministry: "(He) said he'd like to spread the message that religion shouldn't be something that turns people against one another. "We need to remind

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ourselves that there can be a unity among the faiths; that we can work together, and be at peace.””

Forgiveness, love, unity, peace: these are concepts woven into the deepest expressions of Christianity and Islam alike and despite all the bloodshed and violence in our post-9/11 world; those notions are proving to be vibrantly alive and well. I said at the beginning of this sermon that this was a detour away from my primary intention to look towards a vision of the future for our work in this place in order to consider this past event that has so deeply shaped our times. But let us not wait until next week but turn now towards what is to come. Our closing hymn speaks of the vision in our minds of how the world could be. That vision, sketched by the lyricist and composer, is one of love, of sharing, of healing, of unity and peace and forgiveness. My sisters and my brothers, let us not wait even one day to recommit ourselves to that vision which surely comes from the Father of Lights, the Mother of us All who longs to shelter us under her bright wings. Let us give ourselves over to our God, whom our Muslim sisters and brothers name “the All-Merciful.” Let us confess that we are all seeking after that One, as we Christians say, that Three-in-One, and that no matter how poorly we understand God and God’s calling to us, God forgives us. Therefore let us also forgive and learn from Jesus to fill the world with love. Amen.