

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Our Memorial Service
for the People Killed in Terrorist Attacks on Tuesday, September 11, 2001
Preached Sunday, September 16, 2001
Lessons: Psalms 11 & 121; Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1,2; and Matthew 9:35-38

IN MEMORIAM

I had been in the office, away from television and radio, and so received the news first by word of mouth. My initial reaction was disbelief. I reasoned that something terrible must have happened but suspected rumor had exaggerated its extent. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon? It seemed unlikely. Disbelief soon turned into shock as I watched and listened. The first of many times I watched the towers collapse, what I thought was how much it looked like the well-engineered building implosions I had seen on television, but in my stomach I felt much the same as I had when I had watched Challenger explode shortly after its launch. I was stunned, maybe a little because so great and impressive a building could be leveled so simply, but mostly because of what I heard best put into words by a woman, an eye-witness, on the street in Manhattan. She said she had not seen a building go down because she could see only the people inside it. Symbol of America? Maybe. The twin towers may have been built in the image of American financial power and success, but they were not created in the image and likeness of God. The people inside them were. The firefighters and police officers who had rushed to help and who perished in the collapse were created in that image—God's image. Our loss is neither concrete and steel nor symbolism; our loss is human life—very particular human life, people with husbands, wives, sons, daughters, grandchildren, parents, brothers, sisters, and friends. They cannot be rebuilt or replaced, and it is to their memory that we dedicate this service of worshiping the God in whose image and likeness they were created and given life, the God who keeps them even in death.

In selecting Scripture lessons, I have tried to be honest before God. It's hard. We're torn in different directions. I chose Psalm 11 for its anger and outrage. "The LORD," it declares, "tests the righteous and the wicked, and his (God's!) soul hates the lover of violence. On the wicked he will reign coals of fire and sulfur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup." The psalmist is saying from his heart, "May it be so," and we need to admit that we feel in our own hearts, "May it be so." It was anger that brought me for a moment out of my shock, but my anger came over a situation that left me deeply conflicted. It was not pure anger. I certainly felt it, and it was terrible. I was suddenly watching, on the television, Palestinian women and children dancing and celebrating in the streets because America had been attacked. How could they be dancing because people were dying? The sudden rage I felt could have rained fire and destruction down on them, women and children. At the same time, my mind, my intelligence, knew why they were dancing. Only a couple days earlier, I had read and downloaded from our own Presbyterian website an article about the only certified child psychiatrist on the West Bank who describes the daily fear and injustice under which Palestinian children live. What I was feeling as I watched the surprise attacks on America comes

daily to them and as no surprise. Their children are so continuously traumatized that trauma has become almost natural to them. And they blame us because we support Israel. So I understood with my mind, but in my gut was enough anger to wish them blown away.

We need to bring that anger to God. And with it, we need to bring our new-found fear and insecurity. What happens around the world has now happened here, to us. Our sheltered life is over. We are not safe. Power cannot guarantee protection, no matter how tight we make the security. We are not immune to the evils and conflicts of our world. We cannot opt out of the world's insecurity. What we can and must do, however, is bring our new sense of insecurity to God so we can meet it and deal with it in faith. I have been hearing some disturbing and frightening reactions to America's sudden awaking to the realization that we are part of this unsafe world. Some of us are now willing to give up our freedoms in the hope of being able to feel safe again. Those who have suffered terrorist attacks turn to the government to protect them from all harm, but those who have suffered under oppressive governments and the institutionalized terrorism they can enforce upon their own citizens would warn us not to be so quick to give up our freedoms in the hope of security. An out-of-control government can do far more harm than any number of terrorists. That's why terrorism exists. It is the war waged by people who are not strong enough to wage war against the nations they name as their enemies.

There is another frightening reaction to which some Americans are tempted by the events of last Tuesday. It is called xenophobia: the fear of strangers, of foreigners. Already there have been hand-painted signs of, "Foreigners go home!" If those signs were not potentially brutal and deadly (and this fear has already led to violence), they might be comical. We are a nation of foreigners. If the foreigners were to go home, only the Native Americans would remain here, and even they were once, long ago, foreigners on this soil. This kind of hatred, fueled by fear and outrage, now leaves many Americans to worry, not only about those still missing from the destruction, but about their children, friends, neighbors, and relatives who are or may be perceived as foreigners. As Osama bin Laden is increasingly demonized in our minds, we are tempted to generalize and hate a widening group of innocent people: Arabs, Middle Easterners, Muslims, even (strangely enough) people from India and other places unrelated to bin Laden. We must bring our anger and fear to God so faith can refine them and begin the process of healing and re-strengthening us. Nothing worse could come out of this tragedy than that fear and anger might deepen into a hatred and lust for revenge that would reduce us to the level of those who perpetrated the destruction upon us. It is not a case of America against the world. People from all around the world have hastened to assure us it is not. We must do what we can to make sure it does not become a case of America against Americans, either.

We come today to our God to mourn, to grieve as a nation and a people. The innocent and the courageous have perished together, and we don't yet even know most of their names. We mourn for people sitting in their offices unaware that death was flying toward them at jet speed. We mourn for firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers who charged into the tumult to help the victims and then became victims. We marvel at acts of heroism that, as so often happens, probably did not feel like heroism at all to the people performing them. They were simply doing what they knew had to be done. And how many heroic acts were there that we will never even know of?

As I watched the horror, I was struck by an image on the television that looked so familiar to me and yet so strange. I have seen many pictures of refugees fleeing war and destruction. Suddenly, the familiar stunned looks were on the faces of men and women dressed in business suits now covered with dust so thick it caked their hair and made them look very much like the impoverished refugees I had seen in pictures from Asia and Africa. We live in a world of refugees—millions of them. There they were in the middle of New York’s financial district, the very heart of power and invulnerability. The irony was not amusing; it was horrible.

Now, I have to wonder what it is we will take from this living nightmare and generalize for use in the days and years ahead. That is the biggest question. What will we take from this terrible experience and internalize so it becomes part of us and part of our nature to use in the pursuit of life? Will it be fear? Hatred? The understandable but deadly lust for revenge? No doubt some of it will be patriotism, a drawing together as Americans, but what kind of patriotism? Will it be a kind that makes us supportive of all Americans and more fully and productively part of our world, or will it be a jingoism that cares only for its own distorted image of America? I hope and pray that what we have experienced as a nation and continue to experience will draw us into solidarity with people around this world who experience the same type of horrors, many on a regular basis. We have seen people in business suits suddenly reduced to refugees running for their lives. Can we learn to feel more deeply for the world’s millions of refugees and victims? Just a short time ago, Ted Koppel apologized to us because his Nightline show and the rest of the news media had for so long ignored the Democratic Republic of the Congo where, since 1998, war has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and killed millions more.

Let me be clear. Nothing can justify what was done to us. It was and must forever be an outrage against humanity and against the God in whose image humanity is created. So, we not only have a right to be angry, we should be angry. At the same time, we are still stunned, shocked, and horrified. I remember thinking, “When will it stop?” I knew it would not be over and done on anything like a permanent basis, but when would it stop? Another plane. And another. More targets. More lives being lost. More families plunged into grief and mourning. More and more people terrified for people they loved but could not contact. And everything gets so mixed up. This outrage has given us so much to despise in human nature but, also, so much to admire. On Tuesday afternoon and evening, the northbound lanes of the New Jersey Turnpike looked like a parade of ambulances and rescue vehicles headed for Manhattan—for the same New York City much of the nation frequently derides and says should be cut off and floated out to sea. Suddenly, no one felt that way any more.

Most of all, we need to come to God today to reaffirm who we are and have it reaffirmed for us. We are Americans, but first and foremost we are disciples of Jesus the Christ. Our grief, anger, fear, and outrage, and our patriotism must all be processed through our faith and commitment to discipleship. Anything else would be idolatry. Only in this way can the good and the bad be cleansed and made useful to God, the God who loves this world for which Jesus suffered and died. Our outrage is good, but it will remain good and produce good only if it is turned by faith into compassion for the millions who suffer as we have. Jesus looked at the crowds—nameless people

crowded together—and felt compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless. The people fleeing the World Trade Center were just such a crowd. We all are. Is it not one of the horrors of what has been done to us that the missing and dead have been a nameless crowd of people? We didn't know who they were. We cannot yet name most of them to God. That's terrible. The rescue workers have been finding parts of bodies, parts of people. We need to keep our outrage, not gloss it over and go back to normal. Yes, we must go back and go on, but not unchanged. Let us pray, however, that the change will be governed by Jesus and his way, not by the terrorists and their way. We must not become like them. We must not give them that victory, but we will if we allow them to make us hate as they do. Then we will become what they are. Then victory will be theirs.

Let us strive to meet fear with faith, grief with compassion. Let us make outrage the fuel for justice not revenge. Let us bury our dead in sorrow mingled with hope because we know the God whose love cannot be overcome by death. God's will is for the healing of the nations. We are far from that goal, but let us move toward it rather than away from it. For we belong to Jesus Christ. Let us commit our dead and our grieving to him, not to bin Laden or any other terrorist. Let us walk in his way, not theirs. Amen.

Comment: First Responses

The most common first response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 was probably disbelief. It couldn't be true. There seemed no way such terrible events could actually be taking place in the real world, in America, but they were. Watching the replays on television of the planes' hitting the towers and, later, of the towers' collapsing, people remarked that the action looked like scenes from a movie, and they tried to remember what movie it was. Somehow, the clips on television looked too fantastic to be real and, at the same time, too real to be true.

For me, at least, the second response was not anger, not yet. Instead, I had the feeling of being caught in something I could not escape because it would not stop. When the announcers told of the plane over Pennsylvania, I started calling for it to stop. Was I speaking aloud? I don't remember, but, thinking back, I was talking to someone. I was praying, but not in the usual form of prayer—although not in a form unusual to me, just more intense than at normal times. This was no normal time. If only the attacks would stop long enough for us catch our breath and defend ourselves.

When I was a boy at the Jersey shore, I liked to ride the waves. Today, people call it body surfing, but then we just rode waves. Sometimes, after a ride but before I had regained my footing in the undertow, another wave would break onto me and knock me down again. One day, a third wave came and knocked me down before I could get up from the second. As the water swirled around me, I thought I could stand up and get away or dive through the next wave, if they'd only give me the chance. I remember a sudden desperation—not panic, but the feeling of being caught in

something I could neither control nor escape. When the announcement came of the plane over Pennsylvania, I had a similar but more intense feeling of desperation for it to stop long enough for us to regain control.

As I said in the sermon, the anger started when I saw Palestinian women and children dancing in the streets at the news from New York and Washington. God works in strange ways. There I was, furious at people with whom I could not be really angry, but I was. Not Osama bin Laden or any terrorists, but Palestinian women and children. Powerless people were dancing because of their own entrapment in never-ending waves of fear and indignity for which they blamed us.

Should Christians get angry? Yes, we should. Injustice and cruelty should make us angrier than they do. The problem is that the injustice and cruelty had to be done to us before we got angry. That's wrong. We should have gotten angry sooner. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his work on the prophets that the world does not need more people who love justice as a concept but more who hate the particular injustices done every day to specific people.¹ We need to be angry, but we also need to know where to take our anger and what to do with it.

When the attacks finally did stop, our first task was to be silent. For me, it was too soon to speak, and we held no service until Sunday, five days after the day of terror. Many houses of worship did hold services sooner, and for them that was good to do. We mourn in different ways. For me, the time of silence was necessary.

Sermon for September 23, 2001

Lessons: Jeremiah 4:11-14,19-28, Luke 15:1-10, and John 10:11

GOD'S INTEGRITY AND OURS

Many of the elements of this service had been planned for last Sunday's, but I set them aside after the attacks on New York and Washington so we could hold our memorial service for those who had been killed. Like much else in our lives, my thinking about these scripture lessons was changed by the events of September 11. The tension in these lessons is stretched between God's judgment upon the sinful and rebellious people and God's compassion for the sinful, rebellious, and lost. Between those two poles, we hear from Jeremiah God's anger but, also, God's grief.

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol.1, pp. 204-207.

...
Disaster overtakes disaster,
the whole land is laid waste.
Suddenly my tents are destroyed,
my curtains in a moment.

...
For my people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
but do not know how to do good.”

Whether we follow most biblical scholars in assigning the first part, the cries of grief, to Jeremiah the human being and only the second part directly to God, or we at least entertain the possibility that God is the one crying out through Jeremiah in anguish over the impending disaster that will come from God's own judgment, the grief expressed is not just Jeremiah's but the LORD God's own. God's beloved people are about to suffer destruction, and even though they have brought it upon themselves, God grieves because, even in judgment, God loves them.

At least two celebrity-type Christian misleaders have declared the attacks of September 11 to be God's judgment upon America. They have, of course, identified as the reasons for that judgment their own judgments about what they see as evils in our society, carefully avoiding any of the evils related to great prosperity and power in a world with so many poor and powerless people. I understand one of them has since apologized. The question remains, however. Was September 11 God's judgment upon us as a nation? The simple answer is, “No, it was terrorism's attack upon us, resulting in the murder of thousands of innocent people.” Any student of the Bible, however, will realize that answer may be too simple, because the biblical judgments upon God's people were also delivered by the hands of ruthless and brutal nations, Assyria and the Babylon. The Assyrians especially are said to have been bloodthirsty and cruel.

There are two ways we can go wrong here. We could follow the path of the celebrity Christian misleaders and exploit the tragedies to lobby against our own favorite societal evils, which in one case I understand actually included feminism. It seems he blamed the women, among others, for insisting upon their own rights as human beings. Or we could take the path of the uncritical and unrealistic perversion of patriotism that would declare America pure and blameless in all matters, thereby reducing any foreign criticism of us to mere jealousy. We should reject either path.

Certainly it should require a clear and indisputable word from God for anyone to have the gall to declare, in the name of Jesus Christ, that we deserved what was done to us. I have no such word, nor do they. Those who died did not deserve what they got on September 11, nor did we as a nation deserve it. Our words at this time should be aimed at comforting those left to mourn, at

calming the rage of those who would strike out unjustly at foreigners among us, and at searching for that difficult combination of justice and peace we and all this world need desperately.

Just as certainly, however, we need to avoid going too proudly and self-righteously in the other direction and presenting ourselves to the world as America the unblemished, spotlessly pure, utterly virtuous, and completely innocent of all the sufferings and injustices on this earth. As a nation, we have unprecedented power and influence over the other nations and peoples of our world—more than the Roman Empire and more than the British Empire. So, it is both logically and biblically unthinkable that we could possibly be America the innocent of all guilt in a world with such staggering inequities of food, medical care, human rights, opportunity, and freedom.

Right here, however, I must be very careful, not because I am afraid someone might disagree with me, but because the human tragedies of September 11 must not be exploited for any reason, good or bad: not for hatred, not for the lust for revenge, not for political advantage, and not for the preaching the gospel, either. All those people did not die so I or anybody else could have sermon material. The best way we can explain to ourselves and our children where God is in all of this is to follow the lead of Jeremiah and Jesus by saying God is grieved with those left to grieve, God is angry along with those who are outraged, and (I know this is a hard concept for us, but nonetheless) God is frightened with those who are scared. If you want to be true to the biblical message, do not picture God sitting on a heavenly throne dispassionately declaring we got what we deserved or dispassionately declaring that somebody else will now get what he deserves. Picture, instead, God crying with a grief that relates directly to the crucifixion of God's own Son. The Christian way to see September 11 is to see it and all such tragedies and outrages against humanity, big or small, as what theologians call a "cruciform" event—that is, an event that takes on the form of the cross, of Jesus' own humiliation, suffering, and death. Jesus' suffered and died innocently. No one else is or can be innocent in the way he was, but he was not concerned to be innocent. He didn't care who deserved what; he cared only that God wanted back the lost sheep—the lost, sinful, and suffering people of this world. What do we think God sees in the broken bodies of those who died in the World Trade Center? What would God see but the broken body of Jesus? What would God hear in cries of hatred demanding American deaths or in cries for vengeance demanding other deaths but the ancient cries of, "Crucify him!"?

Is there judgment in human tragedy and suffering? Yes, there is judgment because such tragedy and suffering are evil and come from evil. We must not try to erode God's integrity by denying the reality of God's judgment upon a cruel and unjust world. As long as some people continue to profit by the injustices done to other people, there is judgment, and we must not take it lightly. But, neither must we pour contempt upon God's own grief and upon the crucifixion of God's Son by exploiting human tragedy and suffering for our own purposes, theological or political.

I believe God now sees in the fallen towers in Manhattan a form of the cross. I believe God sees that form of the cross in the Holocaust, in the killing fields of Cambodia, in Tiananmen Square, and in a youth beaten to death with baseball bats on the streets of Philadelphia. I believe God also sees the form of the cross whenever someone dies of a drug overdose, suffers the lingering death of

cancer or AIDS, or perishes in a car accident. Whether we judge suffering and death as deserved or undeserved, God sees in it the cross where Jesus obliterated our distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. God refused to separate judgment from compassion, and so Jesus brought them together on the cross. We must not try to separate them ever again.

When I say we need to picture God crying in grief, I do not mean we should portray God as weepy. God is God, and God's demand for justice and integrity is firm. I'm sure God is more than slightly annoyed that it would require a tragedy such as this one to open our eyes to the sufferings of other people in our world, some of which benefit us. Is there judgment present in and around such a tragedy as we have suffered? Yes, there is judgment in and around all cruciform events, but that's not the same as saying, "God sent this tragedy upon us because . . .," and then filling in our own personal judgments upon humanity. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus did not suffer and die so people who speak their belief in him could think they had their tickets punched for heaven. He suffered and died on the cross because in this world of ours sin and suffering get all mixed up together, innocence and guilt become so intermingled no one can separate them. He suffered and died to turn all our senseless tragedies and brutal outrages into cruciform events so God can redeem them and bring about, at last, their transformation in the victory of God's love which will be the triumph of life. Amen.

Comment: Our Notions of Judgment

Most people who believe God does anything think God's responsibility is to protect and reward the good but punish the evil. Religious and irreligious people alike have great difficulty understanding the insistence of biblical faith that God is committed to something much greater and more important than separating people into two groups: those who deserve love, protection, and prosperity and those who do not.

In our misguided zeal to maintain God's role as divine dispenser of rewards and punishments and as guardian of the good people, we commit two offenses against God. First, we overlook God's passionate desire to win back the rebellious, forgive the guilty and shameful, find and restore the lost, heal the broken, liberate the enslaved, and give hope to the hopeless. We miss the grace of God. Secondly, we abuse people who suffer. We abuse them by assuming they must have done something to deserve their suffering, and so we blame them. We blame poor people for their poverty (and even for our own economic frustrations). When someone dies of lung cancer, we immediately want to know whether or not the person smoked—as though it were okay as long as the victim was a smoker. So, without need for any further comment, we pass judgment. A smoker died of lung cancer, and so we seem to think that's fair and God is justified, maybe even satisfied.

My father died of lung cancer. Yes, he smoked—three packs a day for sixty years. He also worked with asbestos for about two decades. I never believed God was pleased by my dad's cancer.

I still don't. A woman in our congregation died in mid-life of lung cancer without ever having smoked or worked with anything remotely like asbestos. Life is not fair, and I don't think God was pleased with either cancer, hers or my dad's. We need to be much more careful about deciding who deserves what. Can we give life back to the woman who never smoked and restore her to her family? No, we cannot, and her death should be enough to make us doubt our neat systems for judging that people get what they deserve. I don't think my father deserved cancer, either. He did more to bring it upon himself, but that fact does not mean he deserved it.

Did America deserve the attacks of September 11? Jesus raised a similar question about men who were standing under a tower when it collapsed. He knew how people thought. It was assumed in his time that God had to be behind the event—that God actually made the tower fall onto those men. So, it was assumed also that they must have been sinners, people deserving of punishment and even death. Such beliefs take the tragedy out of the tragic and make it palatable to those untouched by it. They add guilt and shame to suffering and desert the grief-stricken, leaving them to cry alone. They also push us, whenever something bad happens, to look for some way to blame the victims, and they open doors for opportunists looking for ways to blame unpopular groups of people.

Who, besides Osama bin Laden and terrorists, got blamed for September 11? Who was blamed by popular religionists? Women who don't know "their place" and homosexuals—they were supposedly the cause for God's righteous indignation and judgment upon America for tolerating them. It seems there is always someone ready and willing to name scapegoats and use tragedy to promote his own agenda. So, one terrible expression of religion-fueled hatred against us gave rise to another in the search for scapegoats among us.

The heart of the sermon lies in the identification of the attacks of September 11 as *cruciform events*. The word cruciform is not my own. Theologians speak of cruciform faith, meaning a belief in Jesus that seeks to follow him in his way of love that is willing to suffer. The "theology of the cross" is the alternative to the "theology of glory" which sees Jesus seated at the right hand of God (the Father almighty) as the judge of who deserves what and as the source of divine right for a triumphalist Christianity. The theology of glory (also called triumphalism) supports a Christianity of power; it speaks in militant terms of Christ's enemies and the church's divine right to crush them. The theology of glory supplied the ideological base for Christendom, which was supposed to be the kingdom of Christ on earth but was actually the empire of the church and of the Christian nations. Today, the theology of glory sees no greater issue in the life of the church and the world than *Christian authority*; to its followers, everything is about authority. The theology of the cross takes the way of humility and service rather than the way of pomp and power. It sees justice and compassion, not Christian authority, as the issues in life and in the church's relations with the world.

By speaking of human suffering as cruciform, I am affirming the belief that Jesus suffered innocently in union with all who suffer (innocently or not). He took our suffering upon himself, just as he took our sin and shame upon himself. Down through the ages to this day, he is the one who says, "As you have done it to one of the least of these, my brother or sister, you have done it to me." Further sermons responding to September 11 will say more about the need to see that day's horror

as a cruciform event—an event united with Jesus’ own suffering and death. Viewing September 11 as cruciform also unites it with other tragedies and outrages, great and small, deserved and undeserved (according to our judgments).

The sermon does not say there is no judgment to be found in September 11 or in any other cruciform event of human suffering. There is always judgment within such evil, but it is not for us to pronounce the judgment, especially not on the victims, according to our pet peeves. We Americans have much to question in our national life as the earth’s most powerful and wealthiest nation, but I don’t think the way to begin is by finding fault with all things American. Rather, let us learn to see our own suffering (and Christ’s, if we are Christian) in that of other people and nations. Then, compassion (rather than self-righteousness, conservative or liberal) will guide us toward justice and peace.

Sermon for September 30, 2001
Lessons: Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15 and Luke 16:19-31

INVESTMENTS

“At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard. . . .” Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, people have been afraid to invest their money in the stock market. So, the market has plunged, and, even as it recovers a little, many investors take their profits very quickly. They seem afraid to maintain any long-term investment. I am no financial analyst, but even I can see that Jeremiah’s purchase of a plot of family ground in his hometown of Anathoth near Jerusalem was financially unwise. The whole country was being swept away by the Babylonian army. Jerusalem was besieged and would soon be destroyed, and Jeremiah was the very one declaring the destruction to be the LORD God’s own judgment upon the nation of Judah. So, talk about bad investments! There was money Jeremiah would never see again, but, then, he would never use the property either; he would be dragged off to Egypt, even as the leaders of his nation were being dragged off to Babylon.

The transaction was, of course, not about money. It was about hope beyond the end of all hope. It was about God’s love for the people and the land under judgment. It was a promise for the long term made when the short-term prospects were for disaster. The family’s ancestral land had to be kept in the family, because God had not completely given up on the people—“for I will restore their fortunes, says the LORD.”

God had a great investment in Israel—an investment of love and hope—and God would not sell off that investment, not even when the market index for loyalty, justice, and integrity among the people had dropped to nearly zero. God has a great investment in the church, also, and sometimes we have to wonder how high or low the church’s market index for faithfulness, discipleship, ministry, and mission might be. This much I know: if the kingdom of God depended upon the fidelity of the church, it would never come. God’s investment of love made in Jesus’ investment of his own lifeblood would never pay off. Thankfully, the triumph of God’s love and mercy does not depend upon us, but neither will it come without us. That’s why its coming is taking so long and why we continue to live in a world of such mixed joy and grief, promise and disappointment, compassion and brutality. God will finalize the victory, but not without us; for the kingdom of God is people, not a place or a system. God’s love and hope are invested in this world’s people.

Jesus put into his parable of “Lazarus and the Rich Man” some sarcastic humor that must have appealed to the poor people of the land. Did you notice that the rich man has no name? In the real world, the poor have no names, but everybody knows the names of the rich. In the parable, the beggar is named Lazarus, but the man of wealth and prestige is called only a rich man. Later generations would name him Dives, but Jesus does not name him at all. The great chasm fixed between the rich man in Hades and Lazarus in heaven with Abraham mirrors the great social chasm maintained by the wealthy on earth to keep the Lazaruses out of their lives and off their property. It is the gate at which the beggar sits but by which he may not enter, not even to receive the scraps that fall from the rich man’s table. And did you observe that the rich man never learns, never understands, not even when he is in torment? He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with a little water. Send Lazarus! To him, the former beggar is still a “step and fetch it,” an errand boy to do for him.

Decades ago, a New Testament scholar named Manson suggested that the rich man in this parable fits the description, not of a Pharisee, but of a Sadducee—a member of the upper class ruling party in Judea and Jerusalem.² The Sadducees were the majority party in the high court, the Sanhedrin, which condemned Jesus to death and handed him over to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. One of the disagreements between the Pharisees and the Sadducees came over the question of resurrection. The Pharisees believed there would be a resurrection to final judgment for the sake of the righteous who had died unrewarded and the wicked who had died unpunished. The Sadducees, however, believed there was no life or judgment after death, and so they were free to die rich, contented, and beyond justice. At the end of the parable, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers that there really is a judgment beyond death. Abraham sees no point to such a visit because the brothers already have all they need to know in the torah and the prophets. The rich man thinks they would be shocked into changing their attitudes and way of life if only they could know for certain that death was not the end of everything for them, that they would have to account for themselves to God. Abraham still refuses, saying, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” That line has

² T. W. Manson, in Major, Manson, and Wright, *The Mission and Message of Jesus*, pp. 588,589.

always been a puzzlement. Is Jesus suggesting his own resurrection will not convince people to turn to God and God's way of life? To some degree, of course, such is the case in fact, but I think there is something else here. People will not be shocked or frightened into faith, justice, or compassion. They may be shaken for a moment, but they will not turn around their own life styles, habits, and prejudices because of any sudden fear. Over time, they will rationalize the fear away and return to their old patterns of life which give them what they crave.

No, for God to bring people together will take more than a common enemy and shared fear. The level of fear will subside, the flag waving will diminish, and people will return to their old pursuits and prejudices. This pattern is standard in the Old Testament's story of Israel. Whenever the Israelites were threatened by enemies, they turned to God and repented of their self-serving ways; but, after God had delivered them and they felt secure again, they settled right back into those same old ways. Even if the flag waving and coming together as Americans were to continue (hopefully without the need for further terrorist attacks), such fervor could be used for good or exploited for evil. It could result in much more of the kind of thing our youth group is doing today to raise money for the families of fallen New York City firefighters and emergency rescue workers, but remember the lesson of Nazi Germany, the most patriotic society in modern times which produced perhaps the greatest evil in modern times. We cannot trust fear and outrage to bring us together and keep us together on the right path. The terrorists have plenty of moral outrage which propels them to the evils they do. We must bring our fears, outrage, and hopes to God and try to help a wounded nation think clearly and act rationally, "with liberty and justice for all."

On Friday morning, I listened to a news commentator deliver what struck me as a very irresponsible speech against our government's leaders, berating them for not having gathered sufficient intelligence information for a strike against Osama bin Laden. That commentator doesn't know what intelligence we have gathered any more than I do, and neither of us should. Even I can think of several missions that might need to be accomplished before any kind of move against bin Laden, and I certainly don't see the whole picture. We have been asked by our national leaders to be patient, but as Christ's church we must add another caution to that one. Life and salvation (and I mean salvation here on earth) do not come from fear, anger, or vengeance. Justice must be served, but justice is something far bigger than vengeance. Justice must be served *against* the brutal and destructive, but it must also be served *for* the millions, even billions, of Lazaruses in our nation and throughout our world. The commentator seemed to be trying to inflame people's anger and frustration to push our national leaders into a quick and probably foolish strike to satisfy people's need to see something done against the enemy so they could imagine the threat to be over. It was irresponsible for him, but for us it would be unfaithful as well—not just to our national leaders but to our God. However we may feel inside, we must not be in a hurry to kill. Vengeance does not reward the world with peace; it breeds more hatred and future violence. Justice, which must be done, is far more complex and demanding than vengeance, but it works toward peace.

God has an extreme long-term investment in the world and its people, all of them, with a particular concern for every unnamed Lazarus who sits outside the gates of the free and successful. Unfortunately, to a large number of those Lazaruses, Osama bin Laden looks like a hero, and we are

not without responsibility for that misperception. The good that might come from the evil we have suffered would not be bin Laden's head on a platter but a new commitment to justice in our society *and throughout our world*, with a deliberate sharing in God's own bias in favor of the poor and powerless.

As human beings, we are created to be stewards of this earth and care-givers to each other. As followers of Jesus the Christ, we are commissioned to be stewards of the love and mercy of God and ambassadors of the hope that comes from God's promises not to give up on this world until all the lands are redeemed and all the peoples healed. Jeremiah bought back a small plot of his family's ancestral land as a token of hope in a time of destruction. God has bought back all the lands of all the world's peoples with a payment of suffering, humiliation, and blood. Listen to the promise in chapter 32 of Jeremiah, but expand it to include the whole earth. God is speaking.

They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and soul.

Amen.

Comment: Justice Rather Than Vengeance

The natural reaction to September 11 is to want revenge. We have been struck, and our reflex is to strike back. Jesus tells us not to, but his command not to retaliate against evil with further evil is not so simple as people have sometimes tried to make it. Are we to do nothing and so invite further attacks upon us? Such a non-response would not only be self-destructive but would also do nothing to bring about justice or peace for anyone. The New Testament command to overcome evil with good is far from simple to obey. Even in personal relationships, turning the other cheek too literally can actually work against the intention of Jesus' teaching. An abused person who continues to accept abuse without standing up for herself or himself and demanding respect as a person helps no one. Neither victim nor abuser is liberated. The cycle of abuse needs to be broken. The same is true for nations: the cycle of abuse needs to be broken.

Terrorism is certainly abuse with a capital "A," but it is not the only kind on the international scene. Oppression is an institutionalized form of terrorism perpetrated by the rich and powerful against the poor and powerless. What we normally call terrorism—suicide bombings and the like—is the kind perpetrated by underlings and rebels against systems of power. Sweat shops in which women and children labor as economic slaves so we can buy clothing at low prices and so

sneakers and other goods can generate high profits perpetrate another kind known as *institutionalized terrorism*. Those with the power to control other people's lives economically do not need to throw bombs, fly planes into buildings, or sacrifice their own lives to kill others they consider their enemies. They do not even need to break the law because they can get the laws written to their advantage. Abuse comes in many forms, and so does terrorism. Countless people in our world live in fear all their lives—constant fear, punctuated by sudden terror. Most of us in America have never known such fear. We live in relative comfort and luxury, even those of us who are not rich. This condition does not justify what was done to us on September 11, 2001. Nothing does. It does, however, require us to seek justice that is more than revenge and more than using our power to return life for ourselves to the way it was before September 11.

Key to distinguishing justice from revenge is our realizing that justice means, not only justice *against* the terrorists who attacked us and killed so many people, but also justice *for* the millions of Lazaruses of our world—the beggars on the poor side of the great social divide that separates the “have’s” from the “have-not’s.” The people of Afghanistan were starving and suffering oppression under their rulers long before we decided dropping them humanitarian aid and overthrowing those rulers served our own interests. Yes, their treatment of their own people, especially their women and children, gives us the chance to appear quite virtuous as we do what we would have done anyway to retaliate and to seek our own security in a dangerous world, but we need to go far beyond seeking justice and freedom for oppressed peoples only as it suits our own interests.

Without justice and freedom, there is no peace. What the powerful call peace is often nothing but effective control over the powerless who continue to suffer. Our “war on terrorism” must be more than the use of force to make the world safe for the continued economic exploitation of the powerless. We cannot let terrorists attack us whenever they choose, but justice requires us to do much more than just secure ourselves and our affluence in a world of poverty. If we do not seek justice for the world's Lazaruses, our war on terrorism will become nothing more than “the empire strikes back.”³ No, I am not trying to make a hate-filled opportunist such as Osama bin Laden look like the righteous rebels in *Star Wars* nor to cast America's leaders in the role of Darth Vader, but we do need to recognize that we have unprecedented power in our world. And comfort. We are the rich man who eats well (if not wisely) while Lazarus sits outside the gate. We are the empire. For good or evil, we are the empire in today's world, even though the actual situation is much more complex than our simply being the one remaining super-power. Certainly, it could be argued that multinational corporations function as their own empires, often with no more regard for Americans than for anyone else. American workers who have watched their jobs go overseas to people in sweat shops can rightly claim a two-fold injustice—to the workers in the sweat shops and to the former workers here. Nonetheless, we need to see that “liberty and justice for all” must extend beyond our own shores.

Sound theology must join with realism here to make a point. Does this discussion of the need for justice before we can expect peace mean that terrorists are good people who are angry because

³ The title of the second episode of the *Star Wars* trilogy.

they have been denied justice? Would even perfect justice (an impossibility in our world) secure peace? No! to both questions. That kind of naive thinking ignores the realities of selfishness, greed, and all that theologically we call sin. The very way America's enemies in this war on terrorism treat their own people, especially their women and children, shows that what they seek is not justice but power. The indiscriminate killing of people working in their offices is not an act in pursuit of justice. The notion that everyone would welcome peace if only the world were fair to everyone is foolish. Sinful people do not want life to be fair; they want life to be good for them, on their own terms. Nonetheless, the reality of sin in human nature and in all our dealings with each other does not excuse the followers of Jesus from the quest for justice in the world. The truth remains that peace without justice is not peace at all but merely the effective control of powerless people denied justice.

As followers of Jesus, we do not seek justice primarily because we imagine it would lead to peace, even though we certainly hope that, in some measure, it would. We seek justice because our God loves it and requires us to seek it. God loves justice because God loves people—all people, with a special eye toward the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed—despite the truth that all people, rich and poor alike, are sinful.

Sermon for World Communion, October 7, 2001
Lessons: Judges 11:29-40 and Matthew 19:13-15

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

“Alas, my daughter!” cries the suddenly agonized father, Jephthah. “You have brought me very low.” Literally, it reads, “You have brought me to my knees.” Jephthah has spoken rashly, making an unnecessary vow to God. He did not need to bargain with God to lead Israel to victory over the Ammonites, but in his enthusiasm he spoke a deadly promise, and his daughter agrees he cannot take back his word. So, she becomes the victim of his victory.

The story of Jephthah's tragedy serves as a parable for the human race in more ways than one. In his enthusiasm for battle, Jephthah cares only for victory, and so he speaks without thought for the consequences of his words. That's what fanaticism of any kind does: it grows so zealous for the cause that it sacrifices people to it. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter to the cause of taking revenge on the Ammonites, but not intentionally. He does not mean to hurt his daughter, certainly not to kill her, but he does.

So, Jephthah's daughter becomes what we now call collateral damage, meaning someone killed in war who was not the target—a secondary casualty. Whoever had stepped out that door first would have become collateral damage, a cold and sterile term for the killing of a person who was

simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I understand that Timothy McVeigh expressed slight regret for the collateral damage done in his Oklahoma City bombing, by which he meant the children killed in the daycare center. In earth's wars, children are often collateral damage.

Does Jephthah the father learn anything? We cannot tell. He may realize his words were rash and unnecessary, but maybe not. He seems almost to blame his daughter for bringing him to grief by coming out first to welcome him home and celebrate his triumph. Does he ever realize that the fact his daughter happened to be the first one out the door is not the point, but serves only to drive the point home for him? It could have been a servant's daughter who stepped out first. Would that have been better?

Thousands of people died in New York City and Washington, D.C. because other people fanatically believe their "holy cause" overrides the sanctity of human life. They are worse than Jephthah because they rejoice in the killings, but Jephthah's daughter is no less dead at the end of the story.

Jesus overrules his disciples when they try to keep some women from pestering him with their children when he is busy with the important business of God's work. What do the disciples think God's work is all about? Jesus tells them. It is to the children that the kingdom of God belongs. It's about them. Children are not a biologically necessary nuisance; they are people in their own right, but it always sounds so silly to say that. What do we think children are but people, obviously? Then, why do we fail to see them as people until it is one of our own children that steps out the door and becomes, in some way, collateral damage to this world's wars, economic struggles, racial prejudices, or social neglect?

I don't know what Jephthah may or may not have learned from his tragedy—that's not part of his story. The question is, "What are we willing to learn?" We are gathered to share Communion with Christians around the world and to dedicate in a time of war an offering for the making of peace.

What do we see in the crucifixion of Jesus that brings us together? Do we see only our own individual salvation and hopes for heaven when we die? Do we see only the love of God for our kind of people? It was left to God, not Jephthah, to see in the suffering and death of God's own Son, the sufferings and deaths of all the world's daughters and sons. That's why we are gathered at the Communion table with the world.

A teacher in New York City writes that on September 12, one of her children gave a detailed description of how we should strike back at the country he believed he knew already to be responsible for the attacks so that innocent people would be killed there, too. Disturbed, the teacher had him speak to the school psychologist who soon reported he was simply repeating what his mother had said. The child became the collateral damage of his mother's rage and hatred. We have much to work out in our own feelings and responses, and our children will be watching and listening.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me,” and that’s what we need to do now: take the children to him. They need to see and hear that we bring our thoughts and feelings, our angry reactions and even our prejudices, here to the Lord’s Table—to the cross where God’s love was given to the world. We need to be sure our children come with us to Jesus, and I’m not talking about altar calls or getting our children officially “saved” for heaven. I’m talking about making sure they see and understand that we process everything in life, including our reactions to intentionally caused disaster, through Jesus’ suffering and dying as the embodiment of God’s love for this world and all its children, including its Arab and Muslim children.

Today, we dedicate an offering and rededicate ourselves to the enormous task of making peace in a world that can celebrate the killing of men, women, and children. Let us not make our own children the collateral damage of our rage and our prejudices, and let us not pledge anyone’s child as a sacrifice to our lust for revenge, because whoever’s child steps out the door will be one of God’s children related directly to the collateral damage on the cross. Yes, Jesus was, in a sense, collateral damage. “It is expedient,” the high priest says, “that one man should die for the people.” Too bad, but it was necessary to get rid of him to keep the people secure from the Romans, and what could be more important than security? Certainly not the life of one troublesome man from Galilee.

Here we are gathered at the heart of our life and hope, for God sees the cross in the lives of all our children and all the world’s children. Here we come face to face with the grief and love of God. Everything begins and ends here at the cross. Here we can find healing, strength, courage, and hope without making our children the victims of our victories. Here we meet God’s Son sacrificed so we do not have to go on sacrificing our children to the hatreds, fears, and fanaticisms in our world. Amen.

Comment One: Processing Life

The sermon says our children need to see that we process everything in life through the love and mercy of God we know in Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. Is that so? Is that really the way we understand life? Do we not, rather, understand life in terms of our own interests, fears, and aspirations? Most people, by the nature of human nature, judge something good if it meets their felt needs, satisfies their desires, gives them pleasure, calms their fears, or relieves their anxieties. They judge something bad if it hurts them in some way or distresses them by hurting someone they love. In larger terms, people judge something bad if it hurts people they consider undeserving of the pain or people with whom they identify in some way.

Why did the events of September 11 upset us more than tragedies or atrocities in other parts of the world? We identified with the victims because they were, generally, Americans or else people working here in America. It happened here—on our soil, in our land. The attacks invaded our space

and killed our people. Secondly, we saw the attacks as undeserved. What had we done to provoke such murderous hatred? Why would people sacrifice their own lives to kill us?

The sermon calls upon us, as Christians, to understand and process the tragedies and outrages of September 11 through our faith in Jesus who suffered and died for us and this world God loves. If we are going to find answers—that is, responses—to human suffering in our world, and if those answers are going to be Christian, we must begin at the cross. In Jesus' suffering can we find our own suffering and, also, hope for its redemption. In God's grief we can understand our own grief and find hope for peace and healing.

Let me put it this way. Do we take our grief to the Almighty God who sits on a heavenly throne far above the pains and distress of this world? Do we look to a God who has everything all worked out in advance so that everything that happens in our world, however senseless and painful, is just part of a neatly developed perfect plan and so must be called good and right? How can we call September 11 good and right? Yet, if God has truly planned and ordained everything that happens in our world, then we must.

Presbyterians did not invent the idea of predestination, nor should our Presbyterian understanding of it have been allowed to degenerate into fatalism, but we do bear some responsibility for preaching to a grief-stricken world that everything which happens is God's will and so must ultimately be called good and right. As a Presbyterian minister, I have tried hard and will continue to try hard to say that everything which happens in this world is not God's will, is not predetermined by God, and is not good and right. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," which would be a silly prayer if everything that happened were already automatically God's will.

To answer (respond to) tragedy and outrage healthfully and faithfully, we must begin at the earthly cross, not the heavenly throne. We must see God's love and mercy in Jesus' suffering, not in a thoroughly worked out plan that includes all manner of senseless suffering and death. Otherwise, we are only urging ourselves to become callous and cold-hearted.

To Jesus, sickness did not make sense in terms of the will of God, and so he healed sick people. To him, poverty did not make sense, and so he proclaimed hope and dignity to the poor. To him, inequality did not make sense, and so he taught the ways of God to women, welcomed children, ate with social outcasts, and challenged the systems and prejudices which made some proud at the expense of others.

We need to get away from telling people they must accept tragedy, grief, injustice, and indignity as parts of God's divine plan. Jesus did not. He called such things evil, and so should we. Then, if God brings good out of such evils, praise God—but for the redemption of the evil, not for the evil itself. I have no doubt some good—maybe even much good—will come out of September 11, but no amount of it will even begin to justify what happened that day or make it right.

As Christians, we need to look to God to redeem the evils that happen in life, not rationalize them by saying they fit into the divine plan and so must be accepted and even affirmed as good and right. The evils are evil and do not come from God.

Is God, then, impotent against evil, except to sweep up the pieces and comfort the mourners? No! Then, why doesn't God do something about it? God has done something about it, but that something is not judgment which punishes the wicked and rewards the virtuous. What God has done was done in the crucifixion of Jesus, God's Son. We will find no good answers (responses) to September 11 or any other tragedy, national, international, or personal if we look coldly for a divine scheme rather than at the willingness of God's redemptive love to suffer with and for the suffering.

Comment Two: Our Children

God sees Jesus' suffering in ours and ours in his. That belief generates two questions for me. Can I see Jesus' suffering in mine and mine in his? If so, I can find God with me and cry out to God as the one who cares for me rather than as the divine force that afflicted me. Secondly, can I see Jesus' suffering in yours and yours in his? If so, I cannot divorce myself from your suffering by passing my judgment on the question of whether or not you deserve it.

Now, let's expand the questions. Can we see Jesus' suffering in the events of September 11? If so, we will not see God as the one who caused or even allowed such terrible things to happen; instead, we will see God with the dying, the fleeing, the heroic, and the grief-stricken. Secondly, can we see Jesus' suffering in that of other peoples and nations? If so, we will no longer be able to limit our compassion to some people but not others.

Who are our children? Are they just those who belong to us by birth or adoption, the children in our own families? Do we draw the circle bigger by including the children of our friends, our church, our nation? Whose children are not God's children?

Jephthah grieved because his own daughter stepped first out the door and became collateral damage to his victory. Can we learn to see that whoever's daughter steps out the door is our own?

Sermon for October 14, 2001
Lessons: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14 and Luke 17:11-19

GETTING ON BUT NOT GOING BACK

The uneasiness I felt Friday morning as I began writing this sermon reflects our new situation in America. Before September 11, I did not concern myself with the possibility that what I had written on Friday might be outdated by Sunday. This past Friday, however, I found myself writing about our need to return to normal living but, at the same time, knowing the F.B.I. had warned us that this weekend might bring new terrorist attacks with their further disruption of normal living. Before September 11, sermons were not so tentative, or maybe they were but I was less aware of the uncertainty of my own words and of what we consider normal life.

Nonetheless, as I sit in my study at home on Friday morning, I write that we need to return to normal life, but no, that's not quite so. We need to get on with living but not go back. If September 11 is to be redeemed, we must not go back to being the people we were before that terrible day. We must not go back to being the nation we were before we were attacked at home. We must not go back to being the church we were before our sense of security and normalcy was shattered and our calling to represent the grace and presence of God suddenly intensified. We need to get on, but we must not go back.

The nation of Judah and its major city Jerusalem were models of complacency. The national leaders had sanctified the feeling of normalcy in public life by making a sense of security the official doctrine of the land. They paid professional optimists (now called false prophets) to tell the people over and over again that no harm could ever come to Jerusalem, that God would protect the city forever. They were the good people, God's special favorites, and all the rest of the nations were the bad people. So, when God's prophet Jeremiah spoke against this official security, he was dismissed as a fool and a traitor to the nation. Such an impenetrable feeling of security produced evil results. The more the successful people felt safe, the less they cared about justice in their financial dealings. The more the leaders felt invincible in their positions of power, the less they bothered to respond to the needs of the poor and suffering in the land. Security is not necessarily good—not when it leads to complacency and callousness.

Then came the Babylonians, but incredibly even they could not shake Jerusalem out of its illusion of everlasting security. Twice, the Babylonians invaded Judah and exiled part of its population back to Babylon. Still, the rulers of Judah would not listen to Jeremiah. There were even false prophets among the exiles who continued preaching the official line of optimism that the exile would be brief and the people would soon return to their homes. So, Jeremiah had to write a letter to the Jews in exile telling them not to listen to these false prophets but to settle down in Babylon for generations to come and to pray for and work for the welfare of that foreign city because on it their own welfare would depend.

Had God finished with Judah and Jerusalem? Were their sins never to be forgiven, their wounds never healed? No, God had not finished with them, but the situation had to change. They needed to get on with living as God's people, even in exile. Someday they would return to their land, but they were never to return to their former way of life. Their old, false security was shattered, and they needed to leave it shattered. What security they would find in the future would have to be built upon a living trust in the LORD God and commitment to God's ways of justice, integrity, and compassion for the suffering.

Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one is truly healed. The other nine run off to resume the same way of life they had lived before contracting the terrible disease. One, a foreigner, turns back to thank God and so begin a new way of life. He departs from Jesus to start the normal life of a healthy person but not the same life he had lived before. Never again would he take life or health for granted. He would live by faith in the God who had rescued him from the slow, painful, and lonely death of leprosy. He would live with more integrity and freedom than he had ever known before.

As I have said already from this pulpit, we did not deserve what was done to us on September 11, nor do I believe it was sent to us by God. The people sitting at their desks in the twin towers did not deserve to die that day, nor did the firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers who rushed in to help them. The people aboard the hijacked airplanes did not deserve to die. The people of Afghanistan do not deserve to starve to death, either, and they began starving long before we started bombing their land or dropping them food. Israeli children do not deserve to be blown up, nor do Palestinian children deserve to be shot down.

Decades ago, Buffy Sainte Marie began a song about the plight of Native Americans in their own land by singing to America, "Now that your big eyes are finally open, now that you're wondering, 'How must they feel?' meaning them that you've chased across America's movie screens, the ones you call colorful, brave, noble, proud – they starve in their splendor. . . ."⁴ For filling our eyes with grief and tears, we blame terrorists, not God. But, if our big eyes are finally open to the griefs and tears of people around this world, for that we thank God. Let us get on with living, but let us never go back to the blindness of self-satisfied wealth and the official optimism that regards any criticism, including self-criticism, as negativity and even betrayal.

Have we come together as a nation? So far, mostly so good, although there continues to be a dangerous mood of suspicion toward Middle Eastern people and Muslims among us and a belligerent attitude toward anybody who might dare suggest we need to rethink or change anything in our national policies and practices toward the rest of the world. Fear and belligerence do not make good building blocks for a free and just society. Both are understandable in light of what has been done to us, particularly since its goal was to create fear, suspicion, and a lust for revenge. The attacks of September 11 were intended to light the fires of hatred and warfare. For that reason alone we need to get on with normal living and try to keep fear from dominating us. As followers of Jesus,

⁴ Sung by Buffy Sainte Marie, "My Country Tis of Thy People Your Dying," Gypsy Boy Music, 1966. Quoted in *Journey to Freedom*, L. G. Dowdy, editor, the Swallow Press, Inc. 1969.

we have even better reasons to get on with life in faith and in a new, daily reliance upon God. Reliance upon God, however, must include a commitment to God's way of getting on with life. Displays of public religiosity will not do. Attempts to enlist God to our side in a holy war of our own are not faithful to God at all. We have a right to seek to defend ourselves against terrorism and pursue justice against those who perpetrate it, but we also have a responsibility to do justice in the world and seek the welfare of people beyond the borders of our land. God will not serve our cause; we must serve God's will for this earth. That's the lesson ancient Jerusalem had to learn the hard way. God was not on Jerusalem's side; rather, Jerusalem had to put itself on God's side.

As the church of Jesus Christ, we bear special responsibility in these times, but it does not include serving as the official religious propaganda speaker for American righteousness and whatever else people might wish to hear. We must not be the false prophet for the nation, the paid optimist, the hired blessing and sanctifier of American policy. Let us strive to comfort the grief-stricken and help reorient a badly shaken population. Let us encourage people to overcome fear and suspicion with real faith that is open to God and to channel their anger toward justice rather than revenge. Let us encourage compassion and a unity with all the world's suffering and grieved people. Let us take the lead in repentance for whatever selfishness, greed, and pride in power have led us to do to exploit the less powerful of the earth. As the church, let us seek God wholeheartedly, not conveniently, and do the work of thinking through our faith instead of simply repeating its memorized answers. People's pain and griefs must influence our faith. We need to let the world into our faith and our understandings of it. God sent Jesus into this world so people could get to him. As his church, we need to let people get to us, move us, change our minds, and continuously reshape the ways in which we think and speak our faith in Jesus.

What I am saying about September 11 applies just as truly to the more personal crises and griefs in our lives. It is about the leper as well as Jerusalem. When we begin to recover from an ordeal and are able to get reoriented and at least somewhat stabilized again, we need to return to normal living but not unchanged. We need to get on with life but not go back to the way we were. We need to let God redeem what life did to us by drawing us closer and, at the same time, turning us outward to other people going through their own ordeals and griefs. In that way, God can, not only restore us and give us a future with hope, but can also make us part of healing the world and giving it a future with hope. Amen.

Comment: Security

Security is a good thing but easily abused and corrupted. We need security, but, if we love it too much, it will take from us our life and freedom. No one likes feeling insecure. We want to feel safe to live and go about our business. We don't want to have to worry that some fanatic will blow us up with a bomb, send us anthrax through the mail, or cause a nuclear disaster.

The events of September 11, 2001 shattered our sense of security. On that day, we joined much of the rest of the world in not feeling safe. The question now is, “Where should security be put on our list of priorities?” What are we willing to give up in exchange for feeling safe again, and who will have to make the sacrifices – we ourselves or someone else?

Security should never be the most important thing in life. As a nation, we have always said, at least officially, that such human rights as liberty and justice should have higher priority than safety. Otherwise, we would never have fought for our independence from Great Britain. For the church, the threat of too much love for our own security is even greater, because putting security first turns it into an idol, a false god. Idols demand sacrifices, and idolatrous security will demand we sacrifice our freedom, integrity, and justice. People who become too defensive also become hostile toward others, and the same is true of nations. To the defensive person or nation, mere strangers appear to be enemies. The nation that puts national security above all else may develop a “with us or against us mentality” that bullies other nations and turns itself into an aggressor in the world.

Biblically, security is a gift from God, but it is never the highest good. Too much concern with my own safety makes me fearful, defensive, and selfish. Too much concern with national security, makes a nation fearful, defensive, and selfish, too. It also makes people dangerously susceptible to being misled.

In the musical, *The King and I*, the king of Siam sings, “If allies are strong with power to protect me, may they not protect me out of all I own.” The same might be asked of our own national leaders: if we give them too much power to protect us, might they not enslave us and do more damage to the nation’s liberty and justice than terrorists ever could? Trading away our freedom for the illusion of safety in an unsafe world is a bad choice, and once done, it is very hard to reverse. Freedom is easy to give up but very difficult to win back.

One of the most foolish and dangerous statements people have been making since September 11, 2001 is, “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear” from increased surveillance and data collection on people in our land. Has history taught us nothing? Data collected by surveillance is easily misused for the political ambitions of those in power. A repressive government can do far more harm to a nation than terrorists. Today, the violation of liberty and human rights may serve to make us feel safer from terrorists, but tomorrow they may be used to make someone else feel safer from us – from any criticism by concerned citizens or from those with other political views. Power corrupts, and knowledge is power. Knowledge is also easy to misconstrue and abuse. We need to be very careful about what we might be willing to surrender to feel safer. We may be well past 1984 on the calendar, but modern computers and other technological advances would make it very easy for Big Brother to be watching.

The other victim of increased security may be justice. The American Pledge of Allegiance says, “with liberty and justice for all.” Terrorism, by its very nature, makes us suspicious of our neighbors because terrorists are not a foreign nation with an army. They are enemies among us.

Fear leads to suspicion, and suspicion to prejudice. Then, prejudice leads us to find scapegoats—people to blame for our fears and anxieties. This process has been manipulated throughout history by tyrants to gain power over nations: give the people someone to fear and hate, then promise them safety and vengeance. Keep the threats coming, and take away the people's freedom bit by bit, all in the name of security.

In the aftermath of September 11, many Americans are tempted to confuse patriotism with unquestioning devotion to our national leaders and their policies. In such a volatile and defensive climate, any criticism of America's leadership may seem traitorous. It is not. The freedom to criticize our leadership has always been America's strength and the core of our freedom.

Security is, however, not just a national issue; it is a theological issue, as well. In terms of faith, our security comes from trusting our God to care for us and lead us. God, however, has never promised to preserve our life just the way it is. Trusting God implies following God's way, not our own. The prophet Jeremiah found Jerusalem's sense of religious and national security so impenetrable he could not get God's message through to the people and their leaders. The result was the downfall of the holy city. We need to understand clearly that, just as God did not live in the service of ancient Jerusalem, so God does not live in the service of America, either. I have no doubt God loves us, America, but God loves us within the context of God's love for the entire world. Thinking God will be on our side against the world, so we can preserve our security, wealth, and power, is folly.

A nation that seeks to save its life, as its highest priority, will lose its life. That's a paraphrase of something Jesus said about individuals: those who try to save their lives will lose them. Putting security and self-interest above justice, freedom, and integrity becomes the downfall of a nation.

We have been hurt, and our sense of security shaken. The world is filled with people who are deeply hurt and whose security has never existed. To begin redeeming September 11, we need to reach out in compassion (shared suffering) and seek unity with our world. We need to extend liberty and justice for all beyond the borders of our own nation. We need to find God's love for us within the context of God's love for the world.

Sermon for October 21, 2001
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34 and Luke 18:1-8

NOT LOSE HEART

There was a proverb repeated among the Jewish exiles in Babylon: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Ezekiel speaks God’s annoyance at that parable because the people were using it to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions. Really, they were blaming God for punishing them unfairly for the sins of their parents and grandparents. This avoidance of personal responsibility has not been left behind in ancient history but is still with us today. Just about all of us have blamed our parents for something wrong in our lives. Some people make a career of parent-blaming and never work beyond the resentments that block their way to happiness and life. Ezekiel refutes the proverb and promises that the people will be punished for their own sins, not those of their parents.

Jeremiah takes a different course with the same proverb. At first, his message sounds the same as Ezekiel’s, because he too says, “But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.” The context, however, makes a difference. God is promising a day of deliverance and restoration, a time for building and growth, a new era of life and hope. Within the context of that promise, God says that in those days the people will no longer speak that proverb, which means they will have no cause to speak it. No longer will the sins of the parents be visited upon the children and grandchildren. They will have a fresh start with God and with life. What God is promising through Jeremiah is not just the triumph of individual responsibility but a new birth in the people’s relationship with God—a new covenant—in which God “will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” No longer will the ways of God be strange to them. No longer will pleasing God be a matter of duty and obligation. The people will not fear punishment or rejection, because the ways of God will be written on their hearts. They will want what God wants and value what God values; so they will live with a freedom that can never come from obeying rules and regulations. They will do what is right because they will want what is right. There will be no more religious or moral pride in which to scorn and judge each other. No one will be morally superior because, God promises, “They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

Jeremiah’s treatment of this proverb reveals a deep understanding of human life, because the proverb is not merely an excuse from personal responsibility but is, also, the truth about life in this world. When the parents have eaten sour grapes, the children’s teeth are, indeed, set on edge. We are individuals, but our lives are never individual. We are born into the contexts of family, neighborhood, and society. We are born into the world, and our lives are never merely the product of our own efforts and decisions.

The Word of God became flesh and lived among us. Jesus was a human being but not just a human being, as though it were possible to be generically human. He was a Galilean Jew who

lived under Roman occupation in the early years of the empire. He spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language similar to Hebrew and Arabic. He knew nothing of science because it did not exist yet, and he never saw or imagined anything like the wealth, mobility, comfort, and freedom of the average middle class American today.

We think we are individuals, and, yes, we are, BUT. But our lives are connected and intermingled in more ways than we have imagined. Sometimes it takes a tragedy to make us begin to realize how very interconnected we are with each other and with people all around the earth.

Thanks be to God that in God's view justice is not merely a matter of my getting what I deserve as an individual. For God, justice requires changing the contexts in which people live. It is a matter of building and planting, of removing from human life and society those forces and realities of life which tear down and destroy. Justice cannot be done for one person at a time, because our shared human existence must be changed and set right. As God's teaching must be written on each person's heart, so God's justice must be written on each society's heart and on the world's heart. It's not enough for you or me to know God, to follow Jesus, and to live and die with the hope of eternal life. That individualistic view of Christianity and of our salvation in Christ is false. We are in this life together, and God sees us in it together.

One person's sin never affects only that one person, nor should one person's pain. The biblical statement that the sins of the parents are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation is not a threat but a reality of life. If we build up resentments and hatreds, our children and grandchildren will live in fear and hate. We never keep our prejudices to ourselves; if we nourish them, speak them, and practice them, we pass them on to our children and grandchildren. You know the cycles. Not inevitably but often, abused children grow up to be abusers. The children of addicted parents run a high risk of becoming addicted themselves. Not only the context of home and family, but the contexts of neighborhood and school shape people's lives. Where the peer-pressure works against academic achievement, fewer students succeed in their education. Where violence is the norm in the neighborhood and schoolyard, more children and teenagers become violent.

Are good ways not also infectious? Yes, they are, although I must admit it always seems easier to tear down than to build up, to destroy life than to give it, to make war than to make peace. Such is the reality of the human condition within the context of sin; but God has entered that context, and so we have the promise that it will be redeemed into a new context for life—one that encourages justice, peace, and freedom.

What is true of the justice that comes from God is equally true of the salvation that comes from God, because the two are inseparable. For too long, Christians, especially in America, have understood and preached salvation as a strictly individualistic matter: *Am I saved, and am I going to heaven?* That's not good enough, nor is it true to the gospel of salvation in Christ. No, God's salvation must come within the contexts of people's lives in this world. Jesus brought us salvation, not *from* the world, but *for* the world. It's not just about heaven; indeed, salvation is not mainly

about heaven. It's about "Ground Zero" in New York and people grieving. It's about Afghanistan and people starving, living in fear, and learning to hate. It's about Bridgeton, New Jersey and people struggling to overcome conditions of poverty and low expectations that push them down. It's about young adults who see no purpose or future for themselves and so escape into entertainments and highs. It's about girls and women striving for dignity, purpose, and achievement in the midst of commercial bombardment telling them skinny is pretty and pretty is everything, and it's about women in countries that treat them as worth less than animals. It's about children in affluent neighborhoods learning from their parents that privilege is their right and money their source of life. Salvation is much more than we have let ourselves realize or have shared with the world.

Jesus told a parable so people would keep praying and "not lose heart." Can God really be pestered? Maybe, maybe not, but the point is that God does not need to be pestered into caring about people and wanting to permeate this world with justice. We, however, need to persist in praying for that justice, wanting it, caring about it, and doing what we can to foster it. So, Jesus wants us to persist in crying out to God for justice and salvation—what, just for ourselves? No, for each other and for all the people in our contexts of life: our families, neighborhoods, schools, work places, and towns. Our nation and the nations of the world. Such prayers are not meaningless. They put our minds into harmony with the mind of God, and so they help to write God's teaching on our hearts. They appeal to God for salvation throughout the human community, which is so much more interconnected than our individualistic concept of salvation has allowed us to realize. We are not to lose heart. We must not turn away from this world where evils and failures go in cycles from generation to generation. We have a promise and a God who will keep it. We must persist so the answer to Jesus' question will be, "Yes." After assuring us that God will give justice, he asks, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Let the answer be, "Yes." Let us not lose heart. Amen.

Comment: Our Lives in Context

For the first time in this book, we have a sermon that does not seem to say much about the events of September 11, beyond mentioning New York's Ground Zero in one sentence about salvation. Still, we need to ask what it means that salvation is about Ground Zero? Isn't salvation about heaven?

Yes and no, or maybe we should reverse the order and say, "No and yes." No, salvation is not primarily about heaven but earth. Still, in the end, salvation is also about Jesus' conquest of death, literal death, and so about what we call heaven. The reason for saying, "No," first is that we need to start with salvation here on earth, *within the context of our life in this world*.

When Christianity explains life solely in terms of people's getting into heaven, the meaning of life on this earth is truncated into a single decision—that of accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior

so I can get into heaven. Nothing else in life matters very much, except my keeping to the faith so I don't lose my salvation (some Christians say I can lose it, while others say I can't). Within such a presentation of Christian faith, tragedies such as the events of September 11, 2001 really matter only insofar as the people who died that day are considered to have gone to heaven or not (setting aside from this discussion the question of hell). So, we may assume, if we follow this type of Christian thinking, that some who died that day were saved while others were not. The tragedy of the event is reduced to this: that some who died lost any further chance to "get saved" and go to heaven. To such a way of thinking, the events of September 11 meant very little in themselves because life in this world means very little when heaven is all that truly matters.

In the gospels, Jesus speaks very little, scarcely at all, about heaven. He says much about the kingdom of God, but the kingdom is a matter of earth—of God's coming into our world to act so decisively that God's love and mercy will overcome all opposition to them and make life on earth the kind of life God wants it to be. In the Gospel of Matthew, the phrase "kingdom of God" is rendered as "kingdom of heaven," but in that phrase the word "heaven" is simply a substitute for the word "God," and it means kingdom of God. For reasons of piety, the Jewish people refrained from naming God directly and so used substitutions such as "heaven." In the parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke, the young man says, "Father I have sinned against heaven (meaning God) and against you (his father). . . ." So, neither the kingdom of God nor its substitute expression, the kingdom of heaven, refers to any place but earth. God has come close to the people of earth, and the difference God's coming will make will be made on earth.

Here, we are walking a fine line in terms of the terrible losses of September 11, but we need to walk that line. Certainly, our hope in God's love and mercy is not for this life only, and people grieving the loss of their loved ones need to know (if they can bear to hear it) that those who died still belong to God and to God's everlasting love. The promise of resurrection in union with Jesus stands, and nothing in this discussion is meant to take anything away from it. Jesus says to those who have put their trust in him, "Because I live, you will live also." Love is always personal and particular; no one person loved can replace another. God loves, which is the greatest truth we know of God and our greatest hope. We can trust God to hold on to those we love, in life and in death.

The purpose of this discussion to challenge us to enlarge our understanding of salvation and bring it home to the times and places in which we actually live in this world. We are creatures in time and space, and God meets us within our particular contexts in time and space—which is to say, God meets us where we are in our own real time of life. The Incarnation of the Word of God ("and the Word became flesh and lived among us") means just that: in a living human being, Jesus of Nazareth, God has come to us to give us life, hope, and salvation.

Jesus met people where and as they actually were. He healed the sick, found and recovered the lost, forgave the sinful, restored dignity to the disgraced, and broke the social barriers that kept whole groups of people from life and freedom as God's people. He brought salvation in many forms into the lives of particular people with names and personal histories. He spoke to the problems of human relationships and social conflicts. He accepted women as disciples and full-fledged human

beings, and some of those women became the first witnesses to his resurrection. He touched lepers and ate with sinners. He welcomed children. He even challenged his people's most righteously held prejudices, such as their contempt for Samaritans. Jesus' message was good news for the poor—for all people denied life, dignity, empowerment, and freedom in this world.

September 11 was a day of personal tragedy and great loss for many people. It was also a day of social, national, and international tragedy and outrage. As we look for ways to respond to that terrible day, we need to talk about earth, not just heaven, and we need to seek God's salvation within the contexts of life on earth. How do we, as people who believe in God's love for this world, try to encourage a wounded and angry nation to seek justice and peace, not merely revenge? We must not expect answers to come easily or choices to be crystal clear. We need, however, to be able to expect God to care about the matters of justice and peace on earth and not just about getting people into heaven when they die.

Salvation comes to people—individuals and groups or nations—within the contexts of real life in this world. As followers of Jesus, we must not give up on this world and its peoples. Jeremiah buys a piece of land in a country about to be destroyed. He buys that land so everyone will know the LORD God still has an investment in the land of Israel and its future. Jesus healed, taught, broke barriers, forgave sinners, suffered, and died because God still has the greatest investment of love in this world. So, it is not for Christians to write off the world as lost cause or its people as expendables to be left behind. We need to enlarge our concept of salvation greatly—back to its full biblical size. Then, we need to care about this world God loves so much and to want its salvation.

Will our actions as a nation work toward healing the tragedy of September 11 or perpetuating and enlarging it? As citizens, we can choose to assist terrorism's work by terrorizing foreigners among us. As a nation, we can enlarge terrorism by playing the empire and acting as though only our national interests matter in the world. Or we posture ourselves more humbly and seek ways toward justice and peace, not only for ourselves, but for other nations and peoples, too. We can open our eyes to conditions in our world and realize that justice *against* terrorists is not enough by itself; we also need to seek justice *for* the world's peoples, many of whom live in nearly constant fear, insecurity, and deprivation.

There are two kinds of terrorism in our world. Usually, we use the word "terrorism" for only one kind: that which blows up property and people, sends anthrax through the mail, disrupts normal life, and kills indiscriminately. That kind might be called radical terrorism, and it needs to be stopped. The other kind might be called institutionalized terrorism because it works within normal life, legally and respectably, through established laws and institutions to keep certain groups of people marginalized and exploited. Here, we find no explosive disruptions because, in this form of terrorism, the powerful terrorize the weak on a daily and routine basis. Institutionalized terrorism runs sweat shops, enslaves girls and young women as prostitutes for wealthy businessmen, shuts doors of opportunity on people of minority groups, blocks poorer nations from solving their economic distress, and maintains the imbalance of power in favor of those who already hold power. Injustice and exploitation are the ways of institutionalized terrorism, which guards its power and

privilege with police forces, armies, and banks. Institutionalized terrorism is a well-dressed, respectable hypocrite that feeds off the poor of the earth, pollutes and ravages the natural world, and takes its profits.

Do the existence and power of institutionalized terrorism justify radical actions such as the attacks of September 11? No! The people who perpetrated 9-11 do not want justice or peace; they want power and prestige for themselves and do not care how many people or even which people they kill to achieve their goals. They must be stopped. But the institutionalized exploitation of the world's poor must also be stopped. As Christians we need to see and say that justice and peace are not only about preserving America's way of life but about seeking God's way of life and salvation for all the world.

Community Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving – November 22, 2001
Readings: Genesis 8:15-22 and Matthew 13:24-30

THANKSGIVING IN A HARD TIME

Where was God on September 11, 2001? For help and guidance in responding to that question, I call first upon the prophets of Israel and look to a work entitled, *The Prophets*, written by a philosopher and theologian who has greatly influenced me and many other people striving and struggling to know God in a world that so frequently and brutally contradicts all our affirmations of God's love and care. The author of *The Prophets* was the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, and when one of Congregation Beth Abraham's former rabbis and I were talking about him one day, the rabbi added to the first mention of Heschel, "may his name be blessed." In his book, Dr. Heschel draws us into the pathos or passion of God: the intense love, longing, anger, and even grief of the God of the prophets. Many sophisticated theologians have scorned the idea of God's pathos or passion, dismissing such displays of emotion in the Hebrew scriptures, especially the Prophets, as primitive and absurd "anthropomorphisms," which are "human-forms"—in other words, they say, mistaken and naive ways of attributing to God emotions which are merely human and creaturely. Heschel says, "No." A love that is willing to suffer rather than give up the ones who are loved is not a human-form falsely attributed to God but, instead, a God-form occasionally found in human beings. True justice, that rolls up its sleeves to set right what life and the brutal have made wrong, is a God-form, a "theomorphism."⁵ Integrity and compassion are both God-forms which God calls us to learn and share. The Christian scriptures also recognize the truth we hear from Abraham Heschel, when they tell us, "We love because (God) first loved us."

⁵ Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2, pp. 40,51,52.

Where was God on September 11? I do not believe God was watching dispassionately, unmoved as the planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, crashed into the Pentagon, and did a nosedive to the earth in Pennsylvania, killing so many people. Nor do I believe God was guiding those planes along their murderous courses, as some celebrity religionists have proclaimed, because of America's sins—handpicked by the celebrities to fit their own particular biases. I am not suggesting that we are sinless or that the United States, being the most powerful and influential nation in world history, is without fault or wrongdoing in the world community. I am saying, however, we did not deserve what was done to us on September 11, nor do we deserve a human-made outbreak of anthrax. The police officers, firefighters, and emergency rescue workers who rushed into the inferno to save lives certainly did not deserve to die in the towers' collapse, either. Nor do mail carriers deserve anthrax for doing their jobs.

But, if God neither sent the attacks in judgment upon our sins nor sat high above them watching unmoved as the disasters unfolded, where was God? I am not going to pretend to give you or myself a perfect answer, but I believe we can find a direction for our faith and for our lives, and I believe we can find a way to be thankful this Thanksgiving without denying or rationalizing the evils and sufferings in our world. We Americans had our sense of security shattered on September 11 and were thrust suddenly into the real life of many of the earth's peoples. Our eyes were suddenly forced open, and I pray they will remain open.

At the end of the story of the Great Flood, Noah and his family step once again onto the soil of earth, and God takes another look at our world. Has anything changed? No. Does God come to any new or different conclusion about human nature and the state of the world? No. God promises not to destroy the world or wipe out its creatures because of the human beings, but what God says of us is the same as before: "the devisings of humanity's mind are evil from their youth." So, God makes a dreadful choice. God decides to keep the world and not destroy it and to care about the human beings and not turn away from us, despite our evils. So, God promises that the cycles of nature will continue and life will go on. God will preserve the world and work with it, leaving it free to its own ways and their consequences, but working through flawed, sinful human beings to call the world back and redeem it.

Why does God not simply destroy the evil and leave the good? The wheat and the darnel are sown together, and the workers cannot tear out the weeds without also uprooting the young wheat. Start personally, and it's easier to see. My life is a mixture of wheat and darnel—of productivity and waste, faithfulness and infidelity, love and resentment, faith and sin. Even when evil seems plain to us, God sees more deeply. Even when there are no excuses for the evils people do, there are still causes. Within human societies, the mixing of wheat and weeds grows even more complex. Love and hatred fuse. The kindest people still have their prejudices. Justice and injustice can wear the same face. There is no simple way to destroy the evil and leave the good. There is no quick way to cut out the cancer without losing the patient. Nor can God simply take over and change us all of a sudden by force or divine magic—not and still leave us free to love willingly. For love cannot be forced, not even by God. So, God must let the two grow up together, the wheat and the weeds, until the work is complete. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night must

continue until the slow work of redeeming this world is completed, because the world's redemption depends upon the turning and healing of the human heart and mind.

I picture God, not weepy or hand-wringing, but grief-stricken on September 11— grief-stricken and angry, because God is both compassionate and just. This part of my message grows difficult because, while we share many of the same concerns for life and the human community, we do not all share the same faith. We have been coming together in these Thanksgiving services here in Bridgeton's first house of worship with the mutual understanding that we will respect each other, that we will say together in prayer and thanksgiving what we can say together and agree to keep separate what we must keep separate, out of respect for each other. I do not wish to cross that line of mutual respect and welcome, but neither have we ever wished for these services—and, especially, not this year—to be merely generic and tepid so they express no one's faith and do nothing to deepen our understanding of each other and bring us closer together. So, I need to walk carefully here but go forward, nonetheless.

I believe God saw on September 11, in the mixture of hatred, fanaticism, terror, tragedy, and heroism, a form (or manifestation) of what God has seen many times throughout human history. The problem in an interfaith service comes in putting a name to that form, that association in our own minds and, I believe, in the mind and heart of God. Christians call it "cruciform"—the form of the cross—but before I say any more about that, let me assure everyone present that cruciform theology, cruciform faith, has never persecuted anyone or taught contempt for anyone and would never make anyone else the scapegoat for its own sin or humanity's. No, it is triumphalism, the theology of glory, which looks for scapegoats, because it uses God and religion for power, prestige, and dominance in the world and so betrays the very heart of God. Cruciform faith takes the way of love that is willing to suffer and walks the path of service, and so it sees the broken heart of God in all forms of human suffering and tragedy because, from the Christian faith perspective, we believe God sees in all human suffering the form of the cross. Don't misunderstand. God is never pathetic. There is anger in God's grief and renewed resolve for justice, but there is also compassion and a renewed will for healing and reconciliation. I believe God was present in the horrors of September 11 and saw in them just what God saw in the killing fields of Cambodia, in the slaughter of 2.5 million people in the Republic of Congo, in the institutionalized terrorism of the death squads in Central and South America, in the slave ships carrying their human cargo from Africa to America, and in the slaughter of Native Americans at Sand Creek. I believe God sees in all such outrage, terror, and suffering a form of the Holocaust—the murder of God's beloved.

At the end of the story of the Great Flood, God is still grieved and disgusted enough to destroy the world for the evil of human beings but too much in love with the world to do it. So the story goes on, and God continues to set love against hate, justice against brutality, peacemaking against the cycles of revenge, dignity against shame, and freedom against enslavement. The question now, on this Thanksgiving Day after 9-11, is what do we see and feel now that our big eyes have been forced open? Can we see the form of September 11 in the starvation of the people of Afghanistan? In the terror of an Arab cab driver pulled out and beaten by an angry mob? In the wariness of Americans who wear turbans to work and the fears of Muslim children in our schools?

Can we expand our thanksgiving beyond the prosperity we enjoy to include other people different from us? Can we ask God to be with them when they are hurt and made to suffer? And can we, then, back up our prayers with actions and even change our habits and styles of living if we somehow take part in their suffering or benefit from it? Can we go beyond charity and look for ways to share the earth's goodness rather than just giving a little from the excess we have accumulated for ourselves? Now that hatred and fanaticism have made us suffer as a nation, can we see the form of what has been done to us in the sufferings of others in our own communities and around the world? If so, the good that would come from the evil of September 11 would still not justify the attacks upon us—nothing can do that. We should not justify them in any way. But we can learn something of the way of God and so, to some extent, participate in the redemption of September 11.

Those who died, we commend to God's love and care. For those who live on without them, who have empty places at this year's Thanksgiving table, we pray God's care and comfort, and hope it is mediated to them through family, friends, and strangers who care. For a twisted, sin-sick, hate-torn, and suffering world, we pray for ways to find paths toward justice and peace. Those paths will not be found, however, until we learn to open our eyes and see our own suffering in that of other people and other nations. Then, we will know a little of the mind and heart of God. Amen.

Comment: Responding in an Interfaith Context

In two ways, this sermon had to be different from the others. Being preached in a community service on the Thanksgiving holiday, this sermon was public in a way the others, preached within the context of our own congregation's worship of God, were not. Moreover, this service was interfaith, specifically Jewish and Christian in its form and content. For years, the various parts of this interfaith service had been developed very carefully, with thoughtful negotiation, between its Christian leaders and the rabbis and congregants of a local synagogue. Without denying anything we believed separately, we had agreed to a service that people of different faiths could affirm and in which they could feel comfortable and trusting. We had endeavored over the years to lead Thanksgiving services to which all of the worshipers present could say, "Amen."

Such services are rife with problems, because the most difficult arena in which people of different faiths can attempt to come together is worship. Discussing issues is much simpler because in such discussions no one is asked to address God directly, and no one expects to be able to say, "Amen," to all the various opinions expressed. Certainly, even in worship, no thinking person expects to agree with everything said in the way it is said, but people do have the right in an interfaith service to expect their particular faith to be respected. We had agreed there would be no attempts at evangelization or argument against one another's beliefs.

In the early days of developing this Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, some of the Christian ministers had assumed an interfaith service should be an event in which all participants were free to express their own faiths in whatever ways they wished. Not so. Such a misconception of an interfaith service works well for the majority, especially the Christian majority, but not well at all for the minority, especially not when the minority is Jewish. Judaism has no beliefs so theologically and historically offensive to Christians as are some of our Christian beliefs to Jews. Nothing in Judaism could jar Christians in a shared service the way Christian affirmations of the divinity of Jesus Christ would jar Jewish worshipers. No Jewish symbol has the long history of terror and contempt Christianity has made Jews see in the Christian cross. Christians have put the cross before Jews, not as a symbol of redemptive suffering love, but as a symbol of hatred for the so-called “Christ killers.” For Jews and Christians to come together in worship is no simple matter of tolerance but a much more difficult matter of profound and carefully negotiated mutual respect.

The community Thanksgiving service, though well-received by those who have attended over the years, has always been fragile behind the scenes—fragile but beneficial because of the discussions required to reach mutual understanding and keep the service going year after year. This year, however, was different because of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and because I believed I had to say something in the sermon that went beyond nice and proper for the shared service. We had never intended the services to be generic and so expressive of no one’s faith in particular. Nor did we want them to be merely pleasant but lacking in any message that might challenge us to think and live differently. For me, the question became that of how to say what I believed needed to be said without violating the trust the Jewish participants and worshipers had put in me by attending the service.

The particular problem was my belief that September 11 needs to be seen as a cruciform event. Cruciform is a Christian term deliberately relating life to the crucifixion of Jesus—not exactly a neutral subject for an interfaith service. As noted above, the crucifixion as an event and the cross as a symbol have been made especially offensive to Jews by centuries of persecution inflamed to hatred and violence against Jews by the horrible label, “Christ killer.” (See the Addendum beginning on page 62)

The sermon steps further onto thin and dangerous ice by bringing together the crucifixion and the Holocaust, but it does so in a way very different from the traditional. Some Christians have dared use the crucifixion and the false label, “Christ killer,” to justify the Holocaust as God’s punishment of the Jews for killing Jesus. The sermon does the opposite. From a Christian perspective, the crucifixion is the suffering and death—the murder—of God’s beloved Son. The Holocaust is also the suffering and death—the murder—of God’s beloved. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” (Hosea 11:1) At the heart of the sermon is the belief that God sees and feels the death of the especially beloved in all the sufferings, atrocities, and murders in this world, because God loves the world and its people. So, what can be for Christians a cruciform event might also be for Jews an event in the image and likeness of the Holocaust. In this case, September 11 is a day of hatred and murderous cruelty perpetrated against innocent victims

sitting in their offices and heroes rushing into the inferno to rescue the victims of the attacks. September 11 belongs for us (and, I believe, in the mind and heart of God) with the killing fields of Cambodia, the selling and buying of Africans as slaves, the disappearance of countless people in South and Central America, the slaughter of Native Americans at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee, and, also, the Holocaust and the crucifixion of Jesus.

Now, as a Christian, am I relativizing the crucifixion of Jesus by making it just one more of many terrible and murderous events in human history? No, for me the crucifixion of Jesus is the event of hatred and love without equal because I believe the victim to be the Son of God and because I also believe the horrible event to be the fulfillment of God's love and redemptive purpose for the world and its people. I do not believe, however, the cross stands alone. Indeed, if we try to make the cross stand alone, we are pushing it toward meaninglessness. Jesus is one of us and one with us before God, just as he is one with God before us. His suffering is united with ours, his shame with ours, his bearing of sin (Paul goes so far as to say his becoming sin) with our being in sin. We are united with him in his death (and he with us in ours) in the hope of being united with him in his resurrection. To divorce his crucifixion from the sufferings of people in our world is to push him aside and deny his unity with us in God's love.

I believe God sees the suffering and death of Jesus in the events of September 11. I also believe God sees the suffering and death of the beloved in the Holocaust in those same events of September 11 and in many other events of murder, injustice, and suffering in our world. The question is, "When will we open our eyes and see?" When will Christians see the face and broken body of Jesus in the form of a person dying of AIDS? When will Jews see images of the Holocaust in the suffering of Palestinians? When will we open our eyes and see the other person's pain and not just our own? How long will it be before we feel the injustices done to others and not only those done to us?

Will Americans be able to see images of September 11 in the sufferings of people in Afghanistan, Africa, Palestine, and Israel? In the cries of mourners not knowing whether their loved ones are buried beneath the rubble of the fallen towers can we hear the cries of women and children in South and Central America who do not know if their husbands and fathers who have "disappeared" are dead or alive and in torment? Will our newly awakened fears since September 11 make us defensive toward outsiders or more understanding of people who live every day in fear?

The question is not, "How do we justify September 11?" The answer to that question is simple: we don't. The real question is, "How do we respond to September 11?" How do we process our anger, grief, fear, and determination not to let it happen again? Do we include others who suffer or only ourselves?

BEYOND FEAR

Short-term fear can be good for us. It serves as protection. It can keep us alive and in one piece. If we had no fear, we could be fools all day long. Most of us would not live long enough to grow up. The three-year-old who lacks the sense to be afraid of the busy street needs to be afraid of disobeying the mother who told him to stay out of it. When obedience itself is not a strong enough force, fear takes over to keep the child alive. We use the term “foolhardy” for someone who seems to lack the natural protection of reasonable fears. We do not want our sons or daughters to grow up timid, but we don’t want them to be foolhardy, either.

Long-term fear is another matter. Our minds seem unwilling to sustain raw fear over an extended period of time. So, we usually do not. Our minds process the fear into something else so we can go on living and do what we need to do. I am reading a book about the war in Vietnam written by a man who served as a CBS correspondent throughout much of the conflict. He tells how the young marines, the “grunts,” processed their fears during one particularly gruesome battle for the city of Hué. The fighting was street to street and house to house, more like fighting in the world wars than in Vietnam. Each day, the marines had to advance, mostly on their stomachs. In a day, they might gain fifty meters of ground, losing many men in the small advance. Day after bloody day, they went forward at this snail’s pace until the citadel of the town was finally taken. Nobody won the battle for Hué, because far too many people were killed on both sides for the word victory to make sense. What stayed with this reporter, however, was the bravery of these young marines who would go forth each day, running short distances from cover to sparse cover and crawling on their stomachs as their comrades died all around them. Were they unafraid? Of course not. They were brave, not stupid, but somehow they processed their fear into something else. They went forward as though there were no other possibility, simply nothing else that could be done. Such processing, however, can come with a heavy price: shell shock, we call it, or battle fatigue, where the mind and emotions become disabled.⁶

The civilians of Vietnam often did not even seem to hear the sound of nearby gunfire. They went about their daily business as though nothing unusual were happening, because nothing unusual was happening. They had accepted the danger of warfare as routine, as the normal context of their lives, because they had no other choice.

As a nation, we have been processing fear since September 11. Before that day, we seemed to think, consciously or subconsciously, we were exempt from many of the dangers in this world. Warfare and terrorism happened in other places to which we had to travel in order to be at risk. Even diseases that killed people in large numbers in other countries could not cross our borders. We were

⁶ John Laurence, *The Cat From Hué*, especially pp. 15-35,47.

safe. I remember being told by my high school biology teacher that the number one killer-disease in the world was malaria, but people did not get malaria in the United States because we had no Anopheles mosquitos to spread it. The disease did not exist here, and even people who returned with it from abroad could not pass it to the rest of us. For similar reasons, we stopped vaccinating our children against smallpox, a decision we now regret. America was a land of unusual safety in world of constant danger. Until September 11. On that day, to some extent, we joined the rest of the world. I remember how much the people in business suits running through the streets of Manhattan looked like the people in all the pictures I had seen of refugees fleeing warfare in Third World countries. Terror is terror and people are people, and their faces looked like the faces of any other people terrified, dazed, and moving by instinct away from danger they could not even comprehend.

This is a sermon, and I've been talking about the human mind's insistence upon processing long-term fear. We want fear to protect us not paralyze us, and so we process long-term fear into something else. Since this is a sermon, you might expect me to say the right mechanism for processing fear is faith. That's true, but more needs to be said. In situations of immediate danger, people of faith certainly use their trust in God to calm their fears and regain control of their minds, bodies, and lives. "Even though I walk through the valley of shadow, I will not fear, because you (my God) are with me." My question this morning, because of the long-term fear that has come upon us, is, "into what?" by which I mean, "Into what do we process our fears?" What do we use our faith to make of our fears, and what would we make of them without faith?

Fear can be processed into a general timidity about life, but the results are not satisfactory. *I won't go to New York City or Washington, DC. What about Philadelphia, is it safer? I won't fly any more or take a train or go any place where a crowd will gather. I'll make my world smaller and smaller so I can feel safer.* In my little world, faith won't need to work very hard because I won't allow my life to give faith much work to do.

Faith can also be corrupted and then used to process fear into a falsely righteous spirit of revenge and a sort of sanctified hatred. *We are good, and they are bad. God loves us but not them. Our way is true; theirs is false. Our religion is the right one, and theirs is all wrong. They started it, but we'll finish it.* "God bless America," but not the world.

I have said from this pulpit several times and I say again, we did not deserve what was done to us on September 11, and nothing justifies the attacks upon us. Even if we are able to bring good out of them, even as God brings good out of them, they are not thereby justified but, rather, to some extent redeemed. It will never be good that they happened, and we should not want them justified or even rationalized. What was done to us was horribly wrong and evil.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says, "for they shall be called children of God." Thankfully, the Bible does not separate peace from justice. Indeed, there can be no peace without justice. Jesus does, however, separate justice from revenge, and where the spirit of revenge controls people, there can be neither justice nor peace.

The aftermath of September 11 is not only about fear, but also about grief. We need to process fear and grief into something we can offer to God and use in the pursuit of justice and peace. As Christians, we need to offer our nation and the world a way of processing fear and grief into something other than revenge, callousness toward suffering, suspicion of foreigners, and hatred. The terrorists want us to process September 11 into just such destructive and self-destructive forces, but Jesus and the prophets call us to do otherwise. We are not to answer evil with evil.

Whenever we suffer loss and grief, we have a choice. We can grow bitter, self-pitying, and unfeeling toward other people (as though we were the only ones grieving), or we can grow stronger and learn compassion for other people who are grieved. When we suffer injustice ourselves, we can choose to look at the world with suspicion and to sustain anger until it deepens into bitterness and cynicism; or, knowing now how it feels to suffer injustice, we can seek healing and justice for other people who suffer.

Having been delivered by God from the sustained injustice, oppression, and hopelessness of slavery, the Israelites were supposed to learn to want justice, freedom, and human dignity, not only for themselves, but for all people. Some of them did learn. Others chose to become like their former oppressors and oppress others in turn, taking what they could take now that they had gained the upper hand. Likewise, Christians who see the agony of God and of humanity in the crucifixion of Jesus are, also, supposed to see the agony of Jesus in other people's suffering and shame. We are meant to see the crucifixion wherever its form occurs in this world, wherever people are made to suffer and die, because God loves this world and all its people. Or, we can blame the crucifixion of Jesus on someone else and tell ourselves that people who don't believe in him are only getting what they deserve when they suffer, but if we do so, we will have denied and betrayed Jesus.

"A scout is brave." Brave is good, as long as it's not foolhardy, but there's something more we need to understand. Bravery is not good if courage makes us cruel, hurtful, or vengeful. Bravery is not good if it remains self-centered, caring only about its own interests. Bravery is not good if it calls us to disregard the lives of other people, outside our group or nation, and if it cares nothing for their worth to the God who loves them. Bravery becomes good when it seeks and promotes justice, when it loves kindness and mercy, when it walks humbly with God. Bravery is not supposed to be arrogance pushing forward to get its own way in the troop, in the church, in the school, in the neighborhood, or in the world. And arrogance is as bad and self-destructive for a nation as for an individual.

September 11 taught us to fear and plunged us into grief. That fear is not short-term, like the sudden fright that gave people in New York the life-saving instinct to run from the danger. And we must acknowledge the courage of those who overcame their natural fears to rush into the inferno to save lives. This new fear in America is long-term, and so our minds will not allow us to keep it as raw fear. We will process it into something, and we are already doing so. Let it not be timidity which would rob us of life. Let it not be revenge, which would take away our humanity and reduce us to the level of those who attacked us. Let it not be panic that would give up the freedoms, the liberties, and the human rights for which our ancestors fought and died just so we can feel a little

more secure in an unsafe world. Let it not be bitterness and hatred, for then the terrorists will have won. Rather, let it be faith that enables us to process our fears and our grief into a new resolve for justice and peace for all people. Let it be faith in the God who loves us and all this world, in the Christ who suffered and died so all may live, that helps us expand “God bless America” into “God bless the earth, and all its children.” Amen.

Comment: God Bless the World

It was Boy Scout Sunday, and our church sponsors both a Boy Scout troop and a Cub Scout pack. So, in a sense, this service was also more public than usual, although not so public as the Community Interfaith Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving. Even though the Boy Scouts of America is not a Christian organization, the service was our own Sunday morning worship service and, as such, was decidedly Christian and Presbyterian. The Boy Scouts is historically a very patriotic movement, uniting “God and country” in a way sometimes difficult for Christians who think through their faith and its relation to their citizenship. In recent years, the scout organization seems to have become aware of the diversity of beliefs and even of the difficulties in too easily associating a faith with a particular society as understood by the scouting program itself, and so the “God and Country” award programs have been redeveloped in conjunction with religious educators. Still, the association of God and country is not without difficulties. There remains always room for conflict if people seek to make patriotism (as they understand it) primary and expect Christian faith to be subservient to and automatically supportive of what they see as loyalty to the nation and its interests. For Christians, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all and head of the church,” and citizenship in any nation (or patriotism) must be subordinate to faith in him and obedient to his commands. God and country are not partners, and our loyalty to our nation must always be guided and corrected by our loyalty to Christ and so to God. True faith, however, does pray for the nation and seek its welfare on God’s terms, and so faith and citizenship are not opponents, either—not unless patriotism becomes jingoism and demands the surrender and subordination of faith to its pride and aspirations on its own terms, without regard for the ways of God. Jesus did not come to support the ambitions and self-interests of any nation, but God is concerned for “the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:2)

Because, according to the *Scout Law*, “A scout is brave,” and because the events of September 11, 2001 had left the United States dealing with new fears and uncertainties, and because sustained fear produces backlashes in the attitudes of people made to endure it, I chose fear as the topic for the sermon. How will we, as American Christians, process the fears thrust upon us, not only by the events of September 11, but also by the anthrax mailings and the continuing threats of terrorist attacks upon us in one form or another. The unknown fear is the hardest to manage, and terrorism thrives on creating unknown fears in its chosen enemies and so making them live in a general state of fear.

Although fear can be our natural protection from harm, it can also become a crippling disability to life and even to faith. Our faith in Jesus Christ has more to do than just calm our fears, and so we need to learn to live with life's new uncertainties and inconveniences without undo fear. To do so, we must process our fears into something else. The question is, "Into what?" One possible answer is timidity, but the results are unsatisfactory because timidity restricts life too much. Caution is necessary in our new world after 9-11, but timidity will neither keep us safe nor let us live life as we need to.

We might also choose to process fear into belligerence, which may be effective but not healthful for us, our nation, or our world. One of the marks of a growing belligerence is the temptation to name more and more people our enemies and label them "evil." Certainly, terrorism is evil, but we are not wholly good nor are other nations wholly evil. That kind of light-dark, good-evil, godly-satanic, categorizing of ourselves and others leads to self-righteous arrogance and to war in which we become the aggressors. Never tell a nation it is wholly good and righteous and has God on its side no matter what. That attitude belongs to the terrorists themselves who see their acts of brutality as sacred because they imagine themselves fighting a holy war for God. May God deliver us from holy wars, because there is nothing more unholy in human history.

Sustained fear becomes dangerous also when it prompts us to value safety above all else. Then, we will agree to almost anything that promises to keep us safer, which makes us extremely easy to manipulate and rob of our freedoms. No government should ever be given the license to do whatever it thinks it needs to do to make the land secure, because those in power will always yield to the temptation to do whatever they think they must do make themselves and their power secure. What works against one group (suspected terrorists) will also work against another (people with different political opinions). If the rights of one unpopular group can be compromised, so can the rights of another.

We need to beware of anyone trying to make us sound too good to be true. The United States of America is a great country with more freedoms and a fairer political process than any other country I can name in the world or in history, but people are people, and power does to people what it has always done. America is kept great and free by checks and balances on power and by the right of citizens to criticize the government (and by a free press, however annoying its reporters and commentators may become at times). Take away those checks and balances, silence criticism, and keep the press in the dark, and we risk losing America and our freedom. Uncritical loyalty to any leader is folly which invites tyranny. We need to support our leaders enough so they can lead, but we also need to keep them straight (and as humble as possible). Always, we need to beware of the danger that leaders tend to use the nation's fear or hatred of its enemies to maintain and enhance their own power and popularity. The more we let our fears rule us, the more susceptible we become to having our rights and freedoms taken from us.

If we process our fears into bitterness and hatred, then all is lost. Then, our enemies will have won. Terrorism is designed to keep the fires burning, to destabilize relations among allies and aggravate animosities between enemies. Labeling and name calling play along with the objectives

of the terrorists. Prejudice against Arabs or Muslims not only corrupts those who become prejudiced but also tempts Arabs and Muslims to go on the defensive and begin to sympathize with the terrorists. Nothing helps the terrorists more than abusing Arab and Muslim Americans or labeling all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and enemies of America. Surely, that is the terrorists' goal: to make people into enemies of America and of Arab governments willing to cooperate with America. If the terrorists can turn people against each other, they win.

Into what, then, should we process our fears? If we are willing to work on them in faith, and if we will allow God to open our minds to the world around us, we can turn our own reactions to the outrage and tragedy of September 11 and to the ongoing threats of terrorism into a new resolve for justice and peace in our world. Instead of just getting angry at our enemies, real and imagined, we can turn our anger against injustice and terror as such— against all the injustices people suffer in our world and all the terrors inflicted upon them. We can become more aware of the daily fears and dangers with which many people live, and we can begin to understand more deeply the need to break the cycles of fear and revenge. Neither hiding nor just striking back will ever put a stop to hostilities. Each time one side strikes, the other feels more justified in its hatred. We need to find ways to break those cycles without just rolling over and inviting enemies to take advantage of us.

When all else fails, we can look at the children. They are the ones who will inherit our fears, suspicions, and prejudices if we pass them on. We also need to look at our enemies' children, because they are the ones who will inherit hatred of us if it is passed on. Jesus said the kingdom of God is for the children. We need to process our fears into something positive for them.

How do we best serve our country, best love it? We do not love or serve it well by yielding to a defensiveness or an aroused belligerence that would set America against the world. No, as followers of Jesus, we need to urge our nation to be strong but not belligerent, to seek its own interests within the context of justice and peace for all nations and peoples, and to care about all the world's children. Then, we can extend "God bless America" to God bless the world.

Sermon for the Maundy Thursday Communion Service – March 28, 2002
Lessons: Psalm 22:1-8,14-21a and Matthew 27:32-50

WHY, GOD?

In the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, Jesus prays to God in the very personal terms of their close relationship. He addresses God as Abba, which means Father and, in Jesus' native language, was the name children used to speak to their own fathers. So, Abba almost means Dad. In Gethsemane, Jesus is distressed, and he prays that God will somehow remove the suffering that lies before him. "Abba, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I

want, but what you want.” Even though he is calling out in distress, Jesus is praying to the Father he knows and trusts beyond all doubt.

In his book, *The Death of the Messiah*, Raymond Brown calls our attention to the contrast between Jesus’ two prayers of distress, the one in Gethsemane and the other on the cross. From the cross, Jesus does not call God “Abba” (“My Father”) but, instead, cries out to God, not as the special Son, but just as a human being enduring the horror of God’s silence.⁷ True, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” comes from Psalm 22, and some scholars have used that association with the psalm to play down any real feeling of abandonment on Jesus’ part. Brown, however, was able to hear in Jesus’ cry a genuine God-forsakenness that speaks for all people who experience it in their own lives. In recent years, we have gained a much deeper and more personal understanding of Jesus’ suffering and of God’s love by seeing Jesus’ solidarity in his death with all the God-forsaken people in this world and by recognizing God the Father’s own grief in the agony and death of Jesus, the Son.

We must not jump too quickly to Easter so we can resolve the conflict, skim over the disturbing cry of Jesus in his abandonment, and make it all feel right again. It should not feel right, because it is not right. Jesus’ crucifixion is not a passion play, and if we make it one, then it has nothing to do with us anymore. As his church, his people, we need to see and hear him experiencing what countless people in our world experience: the silence of God. We must not drown out the silence of God with Easter Hallelujahs nor stifle the cry of abandonment from the human being dying on the cross. He cries out for us. Because he cries out for himself, as a person feeling desperately abandoned by God, he cries out for us. If he were doing it just for us, but not feeling it himself, then his cry would be phony and useless to us; it would not echo our own cries but only mimic them.

But Easter is coming, isn’t it? He will be raised. Yes, but Jesus can no longer see his resurrection coming from his position of agony as he dies on that cross. Where is God? Why is God letting this happen to him?

The pain of crucifixion was so intense and so prolonged that the victims grew extremely angry, and they commonly screamed and cursed at those who crucified them and then stood watching as they writhed in torment.⁸ Jesus is surrounded by people who mock him as his body and mind are torn by pain. *What’s the matter, can’t you save yourself?* Yet, he does not curse at them; instead, he directs his anger and desperation to God in a final prayer, “My God, my God, why. . .? Why have you forsaken me?”

I suggest to you tonight that, until we let ourselves hear and really hear that cry of abandonment from Jesus, we cannot truly talk about God to the people of this world, because, in that cry, Jesus is one of them. He is one with the parent whose child is killed in a random, senseless act. He is united with all who cannot find God in their suffering. This week, we received a college news

⁷ Brown, Raymond, *The Death of the Messiah*, pp. 1046-1051.

⁸ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1044

magazine that included an article entitled, “In Memoriam,” for another alumna lost in the attack on the World Trade Center. Her name was Dorota. She came to America at age 17, taught herself English, and worked her way through college waiting tables and cleaning offices. After college, she went to work for an accounting firm in New Jersey and was studying for her C.P.A. exam. When her firm was acquired by another, she was relocated to the 100th floor of the Trade Center. Why, God?

My purpose this evening is not to indict God, although we need to listen to the people who—not intellectually, but personally, out of grief and desperation—do indict God. We need to stop calling them unbelievers, even blasphemers, and hear them, no matter how uncomfortable they make us, because Jesus died as one of them. We need to hear people’s anger at God and stop trying to give them easy answers that, despite the best of our intentions, serve only to silence them or deepen their anger. We need to let people ask, “Why, God?” and not try to stifle their question with our defense of God and our assurances that everything will work out for the best.

My purpose is to say that God’s answer to the cries of abandonment that rise to heaven from all parts of this earth is not to answer them at all but to join them. Paul writes that, when we cry out to God, “Abba, Father,” God’s own Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are indeed children of God. But what about people who are not feeling any sense of belonging to God, any assurance of God’s loving presence with them? When they cry out in anger or fear or desperation at the silence of God, the apparent absence of God—whether or not they address their cries to God as Jesus does—they are joined in their anger, their fear, and their resentment by God’s dying Son.

Understanding this cry matters very much to our discipleship and what we call our witness to Jesus Christ and to the love and mercy of God. Raymond Brown wrote something else about Jesus’ cry that I found disturbing. Historically, the church has regarded despair as a great sin, which, no doubt, led to the abominable doctrine that people who commit suicide go, irrevocably, straight to hell—beyond redemption. What a cruel doctrine it is that tells grief-stricken people God has rejected their loved one at the very point of greatest need, and, thankfully, we have rejected that doctrine. Then, as I continued reading Brown’s work, a phrase came right off the page at me. The cry of abandonment, Brown says, did not make the gospel writer think “that Jesus was guilty of despair or had lost hope.”⁹ Guilty of despair? Why do we try to shield Jesus (and thereby shield God) from people’s pain and hopelessness? That makes no sense. Is Jesus the redeemer only of those who can manage to hold on to their faith no matter what—only those so strong life cannot break them down? I don’t think so.

God does not answer Jesus before he dies. There is no answer, just as there is no answer to much that is senselessly cruel and destructive in this world. Can we give Dorota back her life and return her alive to her family and friends? No, we cannot. Then, let us not rationalize her death or their loss. Or anyone else’s. Even if, indeed, Jesus did not go all the way into despair, I believe he is present for those who have. We must not make false sense of the senseless in life. We must not

⁹ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, p. 1050.

insulate ourselves from people who have lived in the silence of God. Only when we hear Jesus validate their anger, their grief, and their desperation with his own, can we learn what Easter really means. The people who cry out, “Why, God?” to a silent sky are not alone. Whether they know it or not, whether they could even bear to hear it or not, Jesus is one of them and is with them, and he will have no answer until it comes from God.

The only thing we truly have to share with this world is a love that has suffered, that has given itself into the power of the senseless and destructive, that has endured the mockery, that has entered into the place of desperation where no word comes from God. Jesus died without an answer, and we must not cheapen Easter by letting it nullify his suffering, because he is still joined in suffering with a world of people who have not yet known their Easter. Yes, it is our promise—that his resurrection will become our own—and in that hope we live and serve; but we still live and serve on the dark side of the cross where Easter has not yet come for the world’s people. There we serve the Christ whose body is broken for us and for them. Amen.

Comment: My God, My God, Why?

This is the sermon for which the book is named, and it speaks of the young woman to whom the book is dedicated. Here we have come to the heart of the matter: Jesus’ union with all who cry out in grief, anger, or even despair, “Why?” and hear no answer that will ease their pain or give them life.

September 11, 2001 stands as both a symbol and a real-life experience of the questions which must not be answered neatly and glibly with words that pretend to make perfect, reasonable sense, because we cannot answer such questions with what they truly require: the life and love that have been taken away. Why were we attacked? Why were the attacks successful? Why did this person die but not that one? Why did heroes who ran into the burning nightmare to rescue victims also perish? Why didn’t God stop it? Where was God that day? God, God, why did they have to die?

We can say (and we believe) God did not forsake the victims but took them to heaven, which helps but does not. We can say (and I believe) God was with them in the inferno, which helps but does not. We can say we live in a world that has been, at least to a great extent, turned over to itself with its own natural laws and historic realities (which I also believe—see Romans 8:18-25), but that helps only to explain but not to answer the griefs we suffer in this world. What answers the grief of parents who lost a son or daughter, of a wife or husband who lost a partner in life, of children who lost a father or mother who will not come home to them again? Nothing. Words of comfort, promises of resurrection or heaven, remembrances of all that was good, support from family and friends, the sympathy and empathy of strangers—all these things help people go on with life and carry out their responsibilities to others who still live and depend on them, but they do not give back what was taken away. Nothing in this world can do that. After thirty years of counseling people

through funerals and encountering their grief expressed in many different ways, I often think, when I hear heaven given as the easy answer to another person's pain, of Emily Dickinson's line, "Parting is all we know of heaven, And all we need of hell."¹⁰

We are problem solvers and question answerers. What do you do with a question? You answer it. You don't leave it as a question and live with it. But sometimes you must, if you are going to be honest with life, yourself, and other people. Sometimes a question hurts too much and means too much to allow for any answer that is just an explanation or a consolation.

The other problem with answers is that they tend to blame someone. For some reason, we seem to feel a little better about a tragedy or loss if we can just blame someone for it, as though having someone to blame somehow made sense of it all. It does not.

Were those who survived the attacks of September 11 better people than those who perished? No, they were not. Did God love them more? No, God did not. Were their lives spared because God still had something more for them to do? Be careful here. I have no doubt God still has something or many things for them to do in life, but that realization does not mean God had no further use for the people who died. God loves, and love does not value people for their usefulness but for themselves.

On the cross, an innocent man suffered and died. In the Pentagon, the Twin Towers and the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, innocent people died. No, theologically they were not innocent in the same, full sense Christians believe Jesus to have been innocent (sinless), but as far as the question of deserving what happened to them that day, they were innocent. They did not deserve to die in those terrorist attacks, nor do those who loved them deserve the grief and emptiness with which they have been left by acts of violent hatred.

Are their deaths, then, to be considered meaningless? No! Their deaths cannot be meaningless, because their lives were not meaningless, nor is love ever meaningless. Three things in this world are made to last forever and never pass away (I Corinthians 13:13), and the greatest of the three is love. So, with no apology for our grief or our anger either, we can only, as people of faith, trust God to keep our loved ones we commit to God's care until that day comes—that day when death is removed and love has its own restored, healed and made whole. (II Timothy 1:12) We do not commit our loved ones to the earth (even though we bury them) nor only to memory, as important and healing as remembering them and sharing the memories can be. We commit them to the care of the God who loves them, but even that ongoing act of faith and hope does not settle all our questions. The only full answer love can accept is the one loved. If we cannot give back the loved one who was taken away (and we cannot), then we must not think to dismiss grief or settle it with any other kind of answer. We cannot renew the life cut short, give back all the experiences that will never be experienced, or bring to fruition the talents, abilities, and special gifts never to be

¹⁰ Dickinson, Emily, "My Life Closed Twice," in *Literature, Structure, Sound and Sense*, by Laurence Perrine, Fourth Edition, p. 610.

developed and shared in this world. We may be able to help those who mourn live through the tragedies they have suffered, but we must not pretend to be able to make those tragedies anything but tragic. We do not like living with the tragic, but we must. We have no right to try to make the tragic somehow right or even just okay. It is not right, and it is not meant to be okay with us.

We need to see here an important distinction. If the people who have suffered the loss find comfort and strength in promises, beliefs, and assurances (what they might consider answers), we can be grateful with them for the help they have found. The purpose of this discussion is not to debunk such helps or try to take them from people who need them. God has promised to be with those who suffer, who mourn, who grieve, and surely God is with them. Comfort is also gained from the presence and support of other people who care, who remember the loved one with appreciation and respect, or who indeed gained something good from that loved one's life or death. No such help is to be scorned or taken away. Thank God for the helps and comforts that get people through the darkness. That which heals is good, but that which denies another's need for healing is not good. The objection comes when other people try to force upon those who mourn some external rationalization of their loss, some clever or pious explanation of why the evil they have suffered is actually good and is even the will of God. We do not have the right to take the tragic out of tragedy, especially not for someone else who suffers.

Christians have taken to calling much that is evil the "will of God." I do not believe God wills evil. I do believe God can and does bring good out of evils that have happened to people, but that action, which redeems the evils we suffer, does not mean God willed, sent, or even agreed to the evils themselves. There is a world of difference between redemption and mere rationalization. Redemption brings good out of suffering and loss, even out of sin and shame. Rationalization only tries to explain away suffering, as though the loss that is suffered did not really matter much, after all. The deaths of the people killed on September 11, 2001 matter very much. When we take seriously how much God loves people and how unique and special each person is to God, we begin to appreciate the magnitude of the loss. When we go a step further in faith and begin to see that each person who cries out in grief or pain is related directly to God's dying Son on his cross, then we begin to have some idea of the bond Jesus has formed with all who suffer. If we can make ourselves go so far as to understand (even a little) that God hears in the cries of those who feel God-forsaken the terrible cry of abandonment from that cross, then we know something of the broken heart of God and of the true horror in what people do to each other in hatred.

God's answer to Jesus' cry of abandonment came on Easter, in his resurrection. We, however, still live on the Good Friday side of the cross. For those who have lost their loved ones, Easter exists in promise and in hope, but not yet in sight and touch. So, hope and grief remain bound together for people who trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who entrust their own loved ones to God's promise of life.

While this world endures and its history continues, there will be tragedies, outrages, and the senseless loss of lives, both to nature and to human cruelty. At best, life is short, and sometimes life is cut much too short. We cannot make September 11 okay. It should never be okay with us that

such things happen, to us or anyone else. We can learn from it, and we will. The important question is what we learn. Will it be fear and defensiveness? Will it be anger that deepens into bitterness and hatred and expresses itself in a lust for revenge? Or will it be a deeper understanding of the worth of life and the unique and (because of God's love) infinite value of each person? Will we learn callousness or compassion? Will we seek revenge or justice? With what thoughts and actions will we remember and honor our dead? How will we relate our own losses to the sufferings of seemingly God-forsaken people all over this earth which is our homeland? Such questions and more will never be answered by any rationalization or justification (theological or otherwise) of what happened on that eleventh day of September, but they can become questions that lead us to forms of redemption. *That these dead shall not have died in vain.*

Sermon for Easter, March 31, 2002
Lessons: Isaiah 44:1-8 and Matthew 2:1-10,16-20

THE KINGDOM OF LIFE

We must not cheapen Easter. I am not talking about the bunny, the colored eggs, or the jellybeans and chocolate rabbits—diversions for our children making family times that are fun. I have nothing against the fun people put into Easter. Fun does not cheapen the day of resurrection. Jesus enjoyed children, and I'm sure he still does. What cheapens Easter is our celebrating his resurrection without facing his crucifixion. Easter cannot be for us or for the world the triumph of life unless it is the vindication of suffering love. Easter is not our most important day, not by itself. Easter matters to us and to the world because it makes Good Friday the most important day in human history. Because of Jesus' resurrection, we cannot put his cross behind us – not today, not ever. God has established Jesus crucified as the suffering Redeemer of life in this world of death.

The world exists in the kingdom of death. Lord Death watches over this world every day, letting people go about their business, struggle to survive (in some regions) or prosper (in others), fall in love, have children, fall out of love, toil to earn money, and do all the things people do under the sun. But death is never far away. And, more than being just inevitable at end of our lives, death intrudes into every part of life even as we live it. In his book, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, the biblical scholar Raymond Brown explains death's power over the living. In his analysis of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Brown writes, "For Paul, death is not simply the cessation of life but, because it came through sin, the negation of life."¹³

In our Maundy Thursday service, I told of a young woman who came to America at age 17, taught herself English, and worked her way through college waiting tables and cleaning offices. After college, she went to work for an accounting firm here in New Jersey and was studying for her

¹³ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 567,568.

C.P.A. exam. When her firm was acquired by another, she was relocated to the 100th floor of the World Trade Center. It has now been learned that on September 11, 2001, she perished. Was there significance in what she did in her brief time, or did her seemingly senseless death by terrorist attack negate her life? What we ask of her because death took her while she was so young, alive, and filled with promise, we may just as well ask of all who live in this world and of ourselves. Did her life really matter? Does mine? Does anyone's?

The poet, T.S. Eliot speaks of what lies beyond our dying as “death’s other kingdom,”¹⁴ implying that what we call life is death’s present kingdom. Jesus’ resurrection takes our life in this world away from Lord Death. It’s not just that we will live again after we die, but that we are set free to live for real the life God gives us today and tomorrow. A rock song says, “I just want to live while I’m alive.”¹⁵ In the most profound sense of living while we are alive, that line from the rock song tells what Easter is all about. But Easter is about life only because it establishes Jesus’ suffering and dying crucified as the redemption of life. By raising Jesus who was crucified, God has made suffering love the negation of death in both of death’s kingdoms. Because he lives, we shall live, also. And because he lives, we can live while we’re alive. He has taken away from Lord Death the power to negate our lives and make them meaningless on either side of the grave. Jesus suffered and died as one whose life was made pointless and futile by what was done to him. Everything he had promised was cut off. His teaching, healing, and giving hope to the poor and rejected were rendered null and void by the judgment upon him and by his execution. He died alone without hope, without dignity, and (so it seemed) without God. All his promises were lost. All his hopes and all the hopes of the people who followed him and believed in him failed. At the end, he had nothing left but his suffering and shame, and yet his suffering and his shame are the redemption of the world. Easter does not negate Jesus’ suffering or put his death behind us as an unpleasant moment in history. No, Easter makes his suffering the source of our salvation and establishes his death as the triumph of his life and of God’s love.

After September 11, I said we needed to see in what happened to us that day a cruciform event—an event in the form of Jesus’ crucifixion, an event united with him in his suffering and death. The sudden death of the young woman on her way to realizing the American dream and fulfilling her time of life is a cruciform event. It makes no sense, and we must not make false sense of it to soothe ourselves or offer false comfort to grief-stricken people. It cannot be explained away or rationalized; it can only be redeemed, and that only because God’s Son has entered into the kingdom of death and taken upon himself death’s negation of his own life and his own hopes. Shortly after September 11, a picture went around the internet showing a huge Jesus standing above the twin towers receiving the people who died there. That’s not bad, but it’s not quite good enough, either. When the young woman got caught on the 100th floor and perished, he was not standing above her. He perished with her and she with him—that’s what his crucifixion was and is. He suffered and died as one left abandoned by God, one whose life was cut short and whose hopes perished. We need to

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men” and elsewhere.

¹⁵ Sung by Bon Jovi, “It’s My Life,” from the album, “Crush.”

learn to see in the suffering and shame of people in this world and in their dying their union with Jesus. We need to understand all of death's workings in our world as cruciform events. We must stop making false sense of people's pain and loss. To represent Jesus and his suffering love, we must see him in the injustices and indignities done to his brothers and sisters all over this world—and I mean all people, not just Christians.

When I quoted the rock song, I left something out. A more complete quote is, “I ain’t gonna live forever. I just want to live while I’m alive.” If, as Jesus’ church, we are going to speak the gospel of his suffering love to a generation that finds meaning in that song, we are going to have to shut our mouths about the first statement and listen to the demand in the second. We need to hear, “I just want to live while I’m alive.” If we can, and if we can meet that insistence with Jesus’ suffering love, then the first statement about not living forever will take care of itself. If we cannot speak to the desire for life now, nothing we say about living forever will matter at all.

“Do not fear,” God tells the exiles, “for I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground.” By his own suffering and death, Jesus brings life into the kingdom of death for all who live and suffer under its power, because he is one of us. Because of him, the meaningless will not be rationalized with false comfort to make it acceptable. Because of him, the negation of life is not acceptable to God, and it must not be acceptable to us, either. We must protest death and negate its power. Because we live for him, we must live while we’re alive—but not in the isolation of a faith community gathered within itself. Jesus suffered and died for a world of people who don’t know him at all, who do not name his name, who do not come into a church unless they have to, and who, even if they do come into a church, quietly tune out what is being said. Many of them, because of what they have heard about Jesus or think they have heard, frankly don’t care to know any more. Many have rejected him without ever knowing him because the Jesus of whom they have heard has turned them off completely.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God has taken the first and decisive step in turning the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. But that’s no easy statement to make. It needs to be backed up and not just with more words. To celebrate Easter as more than a pretty holiday, we must take a love that is willing to suffer into the realms of death in this world. That’s what God has given us to work with: a love that is willing to suffer, that will not abandon people to their own sufferings or their own shame or their own desperation or their anger at God or their resentments of religion. That’s all we have. And it’s all we need. Easter, the Day of Resurrection, is the day God made love that is willing to suffer into the hope and salvation of the world. Amen.

Comment: What We Have to Share

What we Christians think we have to share with the world matters very much, at least to us, but varies greatly from one Christian or group of Christians to another. At one extreme, we can still find Christians who actually believe people must become members of their church (their local

church!) in order to be saved, meaning accepted into heaven. Against all common sense and biblical truth, they maintain the naive belief that God loves only the members of their little church. Some people still live in very tiny worlds that seem not to extend beyond their immediate experiences and the neighborhoods with which they are familiar. As absurd as such belief in limited salvation may seem to us, such smallness in God's love, the attitude is really not different from its more sophisticated versions held by Christians who firmly and militantly believe God loves and saves only Christians who believe exactly as they do, in their words, and have experienced God's saving power in the same ways they have. Correct belief and prescribed religious experience seem, for them, the sure marks of salvation, and their churches (or their favorite evangelists) make the rules for which beliefs are correct and which experiences are prescribed.

What has Jesus given us to share with each other and the world? He has given us much: profound teaching, a tradition of healing which gives great value to human life and well-being, a personal and almost intimate way of speaking to and about God, a socially radical way of understanding God's love and mercy that breaks barriers and lifts up people the world has put down, an ethic of love and forgiveness, a promise of eternal life, and more.

But what stands at the center of all he has given us? What holds everything together? For some Christians, the answer is *correct beliefs*. That answer is false. Christian faith is not belief in its own correctness. Our faith is supposed to be in Jesus, not in the faith itself. The Word of God became flesh—a living person—not doctrine or evangelistic formula. The appeal of this correct-beliefs faith is authority—supposedly that of God, but actually the Christian's own authority. This kind of faith greets the world with, "I'm telling you what's right, and I'm unquestionably right because I have absolute rightness (the Bible) here in my hand, and so I speak to you with its authority, which means you had better listen to me, do as I say, and believe what I tell you to believe, or you're going to hell." Jesus, however, made it very clear (in the pages of that same Bible) that what he has given us is not dictatorial authority. I am to speak to other people as though I were the youngest present, which is his society meant speaking with respect and humility. The great among us are those who serve, not those who dictate. We are not pass judgment upon each other, because the judgment we pass will be that by which we are judged. Moreover, we now live in a time when absolute statements are rejected by people who see different sides and other ways, and when authority is no longer accepted simply because it claims the right to be, even the divine right to be.

For other Christians, the answer to our question of what stands at the center holding everything together is *experience*, specifically religious experience of Jesus' love, God's presence, or the Holy Spirit's power. That answer, too, is false. We live by trust, not experience. If experiences of God's presence strengthen our faith without making us proud, then we can be thankful for them because they may well sustain us through dry times when God seems distant and life dark. Jesus, however, did not come so we can high on him. The Spirit is not a drug or a rush. At the very heart of our hope and salvation, hangs a man experiencing what seems to him the absence of God. Our invitation to the world is not, "Come, get high on Jesus with us!" Nor can religious experience be used to validate one person's faith or invalidate another's. Correct belief is not the measure, nor is prescribed experience of God's presence, the Spirit's power, or Jesus' love.

For many Christians these days, the answer is *assurances*. They want and believe they have in their possession a full set of cradle-to-grave-and-beyond assurances that settle all of life's uncertainties as long as they keep believing. Here again, just hearing Jesus' cry of abandonment from the cross should be enough to tell us this answer, also, is false. If faith had a full set of absolute assurances, it would not need to be faith at all, would it? Anybody can follow a leader when the path is brightly lit and pleasant to travel. Who will not believe when faith seems to have no serious contradictions in life, when everything is going well, and God's love seems to be present all around us every day? But how does the full-set-of-assurances faith deal with days like September 11, 2001? To maintain its assurances it must either blame the victims, sentimentalize their salvation within the inferno of death, or mumble something pious and walk away from the whole scene back into its pleasant world of assurances. Otherwise, the completely assured Christian loses faith in the face of uncertainties and contradictions and becomes bitter.

What have we been given that holds together all that Jesus has given us and promised us? We have been given *a love that is willing to suffer*. That's the heart and soul of our life and salvation, and that love is what we have been given to share each other and the world. Not authority, not correctness, not experiences of ecstasy (highs), and not assurances we can hold without question, but a love that is willing to suffer if necessary rather than give up on the world and its people. Jesus has not given us a martyr complex that seeks suffering as though it were a virtue or a ticket to heaven. He has given a love that won't let go.

God made human beings with the capacity to respond positively to God's own love and mercy. In so doing, God made us with the capacity, also, to respond negatively. Love cannot be forced and truly be love, not even forced by God. So, God's authority will not redeem the world. Full authority might enslave the world by forcing obedience and conformity (something churches continue to try from time to time), but the result would not be the world God wants. The biblical dilemma is that God will neither give us up nor enslave us to forced obedience and a goodness without choice. Love is willing and free, or it is not love. God loves us and wants to be loved back. God also wants us to love each other—to respect each other, care for each other (without enslaving or dominating anyone), and desire each other's well-being. So, the God whom I believe has always been angered and grieved by the evils people have done to each other, became vulnerable to us in person. We crucified him. That's what we have been given to share: a love that will neither let go nor enslave, a love that must, therefore, be willing to suffer. Living by trusting that love and seeking to share it with a world determined to go its own way is what Christians *call the way of the cross*.

The way of the cross is hard and not always very gratifying to the human ego. People prefer authority and correctness. They love experiences that make them feel more alive and closer to God. They like to be part of something successful, such as great evangelistic movements with impressive figures to make them feel powerful and powerfully blessed by God. And we all like assurances. We crave certainties. Christianity has been sold to many people as a set of certainties for this world and the next. The uncertain way of the cross, the path of love willing to suffer if necessary, has far less appeal. But it leads through the darkness to life. Jesus took and went into the darkness. It was the only way to Easter and still is.

Can we take that path? Can we really go into the world without our authority, our correctness, our validating experiences, our assurances and certainties, and love that world? I wonder. It's difficult even to imagine what such a church would be like. I don't know. I do, however, have a pretty good idea *whom* it would be like. Imagine that.

Such a church would be able to go to Ground Zero without a set of answers, without prescriptions for those who were grieving their losses, and without judgment upon those who had suffered and died. Indeed, such a church has gone there—at least, such people of faith have gone there and endured the questions, the emotions, and the doubts without having to satisfy themselves at the expense of those left in the dark. We don't all need to go to Ground Zero to find people with anger, fear, doubt, and questions—many hard and painful questions—because they are all around us. They don't need unquestionable authority, religious highs, salvation formulas, or neatly packaged assurances. They need a God who is vulnerable, a Messiah (or whatever they might call him) who can be hurt as they have been hurt. Can we, the church grown soft through centuries of establishment and prestige, represent such a God to them? Can we who demand to be believed accept their disbelief and stay with them? Can we take the heat? If not, we have nothing to offer to them, because truly all we have is our own vulnerable humanity with more questions than answers, helpless before such a nightmare of suffering and death, and yet somehow held by the Christ who has himself gone into the heart of our darkness.

For a sin-sick and suffering world growing bitter, cynical, and callously violent, Easter has not yet come. We must not rush it, because such a world requires much more than lilies and hallelujahs. “For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” is not at all apparent at Ground Zero nor in homes with empty seats at the table on Easter Sunday. It is not apparent in Pakistan's camps for Afghan refugees. The reign of God is hard to find in Gaza, the West Bank, or Jerusalem. Where is the resurrection, the triumph of life, in Sudan? The “fellowship of Christian love” is difficult to locate in Northern Ireland. “The three sad days” have not “quickly sped”¹⁶ from children who are not succeeding in school, have no effective support at home, are not learning to read with anything like comprehension, are hungry and angry when they go to school, and are not helped one bit by standardized tests that tell them they are deficient (which they hear as “stupid” and “hopeless”).

Is there no love in the world, no light, no joy, no wonderful life to experience? Yes, of course there is. Thanks be to God! But God's eye of compassion is always on the people left out of the light, denied the joy, and suffering experiences that are anything but wonderful.

Perhaps the hardest thing to remember is that God also loves people who hate each other. When we demonize our enemies and rejoice in their destruction, we have left the way of God. If we write people off as hopeless or worthless, we have turned away from Jesus.

If I were to be asked what the Christian churches need to be faithful to Jesus in our times, I think I would put at the top of the list that they need to become humble and vulnerable to people.

¹⁶ From the Easter hymn, “The Strife Is O'er, the Battle Done.”

I suppose all I'm really saying here is that we need to become like Jesus and not like successful, powerful, and impressive Christian churches or movements.

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2002
Lessons: Psalm 66:1-4,8-12,16 and John 14:15-21,25-28

LIVING IN BETWEEN

Throughout these Sundays of Easter, I have been trying to relate our resurrection hope, God's resurrection promise, to our life right now in this world. Will there be life beyond death for the people who belong with Jesus to God? Yes, there will. He has promised us, "Because I live, you shall live also," but our message to the world's people is not, "Make your reservation now for a place in heaven. You could die tomorrow; so you had better accept Jesus Christ today before it's too late" We must not reduce our mission to: *Get them saved before they die*. No, that is not our gospel. That kind of preaching sends the wrong message to the world's people and to Christians themselves by reducing all of life to a decision you or I make that supposedly governs where we will go when we die. What happens to this time when we live? Where is God's love for the world if heaven is all that matters? Where is God's demand for justice in this world or God's promise of peace on earth? What happened to the love people have for each other? This kind of preaching takes all meaning from human society and so tends to see the world as a secular trap from which people must be rescued and then kept in a safe, hermetically sealed Christian environment so they will stay saved until they die, because that's all that supposedly matters—staying saved until we die.

I am not saying this life is all we have; it is not. I am not saying our faith doesn't matter; it certainly does matter, but not just for admission to heaven. It matters for life on earth this day. As a Presbyterian, I must add, however, that my decision to accept Jesus as my Savior is not primary for my salvation. I have not chosen him; he has chosen me. Without going into the whole matter of what God may have decided before creating the world, let me say that the human decision for your salvation and mine is the one we hear in Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when he accepted suffering and death because God loves this world so much. What faith I have is not really my decision at all but my response to his decision. So, I'm not trying to take anything away from anyone's faith that those who belong with Jesus to God will indeed be raised to eternal life. That promise stands, and we can count on it. What I believe we must do to be true to Jesus and his gospel is to bring that promise of life home to where we live right now. Jesus taught us to pray to God, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He did not teach us to scorn the life of earth or attempt to escape from it, nor did he call us to isolate ourselves into Christian ghettos, safe from the temptations of the world and the questions or sufferings of its people. He never told us to forget about the injustices of this world because everything will be fine in heaven. He has sent us into this world and not just to call more people out of it. God's demand for justice in human societies is no less today than it was in the time of Israel's prophets. God's compassion for the lost and the broken is no less than it was when Jesus went about healing the sick and forgiving the sinful.

I have told our confirmation class that we live by trusting and serving Jesus during what I have termed the time “in between.” The obvious question is, “In between what and what?” and the answer is that we live in the time between Jesus’ resurrection and the complete triumph of God’s love most people call his “second coming.” Theologians call it the *consummation*, meaning the full realization of God’s victory over sin and death—the day when all that opposes God’s love and mercy will be gone forever and all the hurts will be healed. That day is promised to us.

Many Christians and churches, however, have chosen either to ignore that promise or to exploit it. Those who ignore the promise seek God’s help and strength for dealing with life and its troubles in the day at hand while trusting God to receive them into heaven when they die, but their hope for this world is severely limited, and their faith is almost entirely personalized—it’s all about them. Other Christians whose faith seems mainly to inhabit the pages of Revelation, the Apocalypse, exploit the promise by turning it into Doomsday to scare people into believing what their churches tell them to believe. The one way tempts us to ignore the promise as an unrealistic hope; the other rejects the world as a lost cause and is quite content to see the majority of the world’s people left behind.

Let’s listen to Jesus through John 14. He has not left us on our own. Jesus is present for us by the coming of the Holy Spirit who lives among us and even within us. But don’t mistake the Spirit for your own conscience. The Spirit is greater than your conscience or mine, because the conscience can be a terrible liar. My conscience, on its own, speaks only what it has been taught to speak. Despite the popular wisdom of Disney’s Jiminy Cricket who says, “Let your conscience be your guide,” the conscience becomes a reliable guide only when it is being retrained by the Spirit in the way of Jesus. Suicide bombers die with a clear conscience, but they do not act according to the Spirit of truth.

Jesus says that, if we love him, we will keep his commandments, and he gives us his new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Those who love him keep his word, and so become children of God because he and they now belong to God together. The Spirit works quietly to teach, guide, and transform us into new people living life a new way. The Spirit makes Jesus and his teaching present to us and effective at changing our minds. So, Jesus is able to give us a peace, a wholeness, the world cannot give, and we can live in that peace in the midst of trouble and find that wholeness within this world’s brokenness and our own.

Jesus has gone from us, and we do not see him. You and I have never seen him. We don’t even know what he looked like. But he also says, “I am coming to you,” and so we trust in his presence today and look forward to his coming.

We live in the time in between. Through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, God’s love and mercy already have triumphed over sin and death. Now, look around you. Then, look within yourself. Neither sin nor death has gone away. People still get hurt and broken. Prejudice and hatred are not only out there in the world but inside us, waiting for some fear or offense to fan them into flame. Injustices are built into all the systems of human societies— economic, political,

educational, and social. We must not take the gospel of Jesus Christ away from the world's needs. The fact that we cannot solve all the problems does not excuse us from holding to the promise and dealing with people in terms of that promise. Because of Jesus, we can see what is wrong, and we are not to accept what is wrong simply because we lack the power to change it. The promise of wholeness, justice, and peace keeps hope alive. We deal with the world, not on its terms nor ours, but on Jesus' terms. We live in the present but do so in hope for the future God has promised.

We have been praying for peace and justice in the Middle East. Do you realize how futile such prayers seem realistically? The more I read about that region and about the histories and attitudes of the groups involved in the conflicts, the less hope I can find anywhere in the whole, extremely complex situation. The need, the lust, for revenge seems built into all of life there because it is deeply imbedded in the people's minds and even in their consciences. Still, we pray for peace and justice for people who seem to want neither. Why? We pray for them because God wants them.

The Doomsday preachers might take another view. They might actually be encouraged by all the conflict in the Middle East, hoping it will blow up into a full-scale Armageddon. Then, maybe, all the bad people will get burned to a crisp or just left behind, while God's people will be taken away from this doomed world into glory. Because God so hates the world? No, we continue to pray for peace and justice for all people because God so loves the world.

Our hope for what God has promised keeps us from giving up, and the Spirit keeps us from giving up—on people, on life, on human societies, or on ourselves. To live trusting Jesus and serving him in this time in between his resurrection and his coming is to refuse to stop loving this world. It is to refuse to give up the world or its people to destruction, even if they seem to want it. We are to persist in hope, not because we can see how it will triumph, but because God is the one who has promised us that day when love and mercy will overcome all opposition in the world and within us. Amen.

Comment: Why this Sermon?

What does this sermon have to do with September 11, 2001, and why is it included in this book? The reasons for its inclusion are to be found, not in direct references to the attacks of 9-11 or to terrorism in general, but in the issue of Christian attitudes toward the world and Christian understandings of the times in which we live.

For the apocalyptic Christian, the only time that matters is the end time. The only real question is, "Who will be taken (up in the rapture to glory) and who left behind?" This type of Christianity has little use for the world as such and values time only as an approach ramp to the end time. Social issues of justice, freedom, equity, reconciliation, and human dignity are seen as mostly irrelevant, because these times are evil and are passing away. So, endure the evils of the present without losing faith and wait for the time to come. Does something that happens seem tragic and

senseless, never mind; it will all make sense when that final day comes, or else it will be left behind in its own, forgotten, meaninglessness.

We do live in the end time in the sense that we are moving toward something of God's making and not toward our own destruction and meaningless oblivion. The end time, however, is also the time in between, and it is a time that matters very much, not just a ramp to eternal bliss or eternal torment. We live in the time between Jesus' resurrection, in which the triumph of life is accomplished, and his coming, in which the triumph of life will be realized and consummated. We live with hope for what we do not yet see, but we are also (and most importantly) to live with love for what we do see. God loves this world, and any Christian theology or teaching which abandons that truth (and this world God loves) has abandoned Jesus.

For Doomsday Christianity, the only trouble with September 11 is that it wasn't big enough. The whole world did not end in a blazing inferno from which God would, at the last moment, snatch the faithful to glory.

Jesus was always among the people left out and left behind. He still is. Whenever we write people off as a lost cause, an unworthy time commitment, a doomed lot, Jesus will be among them. He is the Savior of the outcast, the unrepentant, the lost.

This sermon is included because it speaks to the question, "Why, God?" applied to September 11 and all the other events in life and history that make people suffer, die, and grieve. Here, the question is not, "God, why did it happen?" but, "God, why does it matter so much to you that it did it happen, and why should it matter to us?" If days such as 9-11 are just warmups for Doomsday, then what of it? But, if they are, instead, days akin in the mind and heart of God to the day of Jesus' crucifixion, then God still cares very much about our world and its people, and life matters to God more than we know.

We must not abandon this world and its people. We must not, in the name of Jesus, devise any theology or message which says people don't matter unless they are the right people, by any definition whatsoever of right people. Jesus gave himself for God to the wrong people, and he died as one of them.

Our modern Christian notion that, in terms of salvation, people are strictly individuals makes no sense. To contrast salvation with social justice makes no sense and has no biblical validity. Who is a person all alone, with no relationships to other people? That person would be no one, a nobody—an animal with a large brain, perhaps, but not a person. It is impossible to see people as people without recognizing their relationships and dealings with each other, because no individual exists alone. Love, friendship, neighborliness, and compassion are not just realities of human life, they are realities of utmost importance to God. How can anyone read the Bible and imagine that social justice is not a matter of highest concern to God? I know the answer: it's the nonsense about dispensations. According to these fabricated, unbiblical dispensationalist theories and schemes, we are in the last days when God supposedly no longer cares about all the matters of earth that once

concerned God so deeply God sent Jesus to suffer and die to redeem them and earth's people. Someone has told us we no longer need to care about peace, justice, mercy, equality, and freedom, and some of us have believed the nonsense. How convenient! Now, we can just put rapture bumper stickers on our cars and trucks and wait for it to come. To hell with the world—literally.

This sermon is included in the book because the events of September 11 matter to God and must matter to people seeking to follow Jesus. The strife between Israel and Palestine matters and needs, somehow, to be resolved into peace with justice—not fanned into Armageddon. God still loves this world, and so must we.

Sermon for June 16, 2002
Lessons: Genesis 3:8-21 and Ephesians 2:11-22

HEALING THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

I am amazed at how current Genesis 3 continues to be in our world. When human beings turn from God and try to live as gods to themselves, the harmony of creation is broken and all our human relations with each other are disrupted. In the Genesis story of our downfall, the human beings reject the grace of God in favor of life on their own terms. They will be “as gods” to themselves and to each other, and they will decide for themselves what is good or evil. Their first loss is not merely innocence but dignity. Having chosen the self, the ego, as their center of life, they become self-conscious and suddenly realize they are naked. For the first time, they feel the need to cover up. God finds the would-be gods hiding in the bushes.

The next casualty is the delight the man and woman found in each other. Now, he is blaming his own failure on the woman and on God for giving her to him. There will be pain in bearing children, and the labor pains will be the least of it, because the children of Adam and Eve will be jealous of each other and will kill each other. From that jealousy come endless cycles of fear, suspicion, and revenge. The humans are alienated from the animal kingdom and even from the soil itself. Work will become the toil, not of productivity and accomplishment, but of mere survival and futility.

As Genesis continues painting its picture of us and our world, brother murders brother, revenge becomes a twisted mark of honor, and humanity is divided into tribes and nations which do not understand each other. The entire painting, of course, provides the backdrop against which the Bible begins the story of God's long work of redeeming this world, of taking it back. The rest of the Bible tells of God's intervention into human life and God's stubborn refusal to give us up to our own fears and ambitions. What amazes me is how painfully well those early chapters of Genesis portray our own world right down to these so-called postmodern times. We are Adam and Eve, the would-be gods of our own lives who end up hiding in the bushes. We are Cain the jealous and murderous but, also, Abel the victim. Lamech still lives in our world. Do you know Lamech? He is a

descendent of Cain who brags about his own brutality in taking massive revenge for even the smallest offenses. No one can mess with Lamech and get away with it. He always strikes back harder, much harder, than he was hit. Lamech not only lives in our world today but has been put in charge of the world's ongoing conflicts. He is on both sides of the hatred and violence between the Israelis and Palestinians, and he has been on all sides in Lebanon. But Lamech is not confined to the Middle East. He thrives wherever people take pride in brutality and find honor in revenge. Since September 11, Lamech is fighting to take control of America.

Bridgeton has some choices to make about its place in Genesis, chapter 11, where we find the story of the Tower of Babel. The people give up their grand design of building the tower, but they do not then go on to build what they really need, which is a community of understanding and respect for each other. Instead, they break into their separate ethnic and language groups and go their separate ways. What does this ancient story have to do with Bridgeton? Imagine people abandoning community and the promise of working together for mutual well-being only to separate themselves into groups that do not understand and will not respect each other. In the story, the tower they abandon is just a mud-brick monument to the foolishness of human pride and pretense. The tragedy is that the people also abandon each other. Understanding each other is a project they do not undertake. In Bridgeton, we still have choices. We can still choose to work at understanding each other and building, not a proud tower of Babel, but a community.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle presents Jesus crucified as the one who brings together in his own broken body two alien and hostile groups, in this case the Jews and the Gentiles who together become the early church. The tragedy here is that the reconciliation was subsequently rejected, not only by Judaism, but much more vehemently and brutally by Gentile Christianity, which went on to turn Jesus' cross into a symbol representing to Jews, not reconciliation or love or mercy or grace, but false accusation, contempt, and murder. In the Dark Ages, our Christian Holy Week became a time for European Jews to fear for their lives, their homes, and their women.

Still, what we read in the Letter to the Ephesians stands as the model for reconciliation and healing in our strife-torn world. We need to pray and pray hard for that healing in many different areas of life where humanity is wounded and bleeding. I would like to say that, while continuing to pray, we should also *work* for healing, but I think that, before we can do much work together, we need to *think* and think very hard about healing and our need for it. We cannot work effectively on problems we do not understand. Before people can work together, they need to listen to each other and keep listening until they can see and feel life from the other side of the division or conflict.

We find salvation personally when we see and feel our own sin, shame, and suffering in the broken body of Jesus and we are led to realize the love that brings him together with us in a redemptive bond of suffering. That's when we begin to find healing for ourselves, but how do we find healing and reconciliation for the human community, which is anything but a community? We need to see Jesus' suffering, not only in our own, but in other people's suffering. We need to learn to feel each other's pain, not just our own. It's not about saying, "I feel your pain," and it's not about

pity. Nobody wants pity. It's about compassion, which means "feeling or suffering with" someone else. Pity reaches down, but compassion reaches out—person to person, equal to equal.

Very sadly, the cross of Jesus no longer qualifies as a symbol of reconciliation in much of our world. It's not Jesus' fault nor God's nor even the world's. The established churches and European Christendom turned the cross into a symbol of Western power, and power does not reconcile peoples to each other, especially not those who believe they have suffered under the very power the cross came to symbolize.

After the September 11 attacks upon America, I said in more than one sermon we need to see that terrible day as a cruciform event, an event of horror and suffering bearing the form and likeness of Jesus' crucifixion. I also said, however, that we can make September 11 a cruciform event only as we become willing to see other peoples' and other nation's sufferings as cruciform, also. Not just our own, but theirs as well.

The goal of this sermon is not Christian self-indictment but an awareness of the need for good, long, hard thinking about healing the human community. The cross is still the answer but not—at least not yet—as a symbol in itself. Let me use September 11 as an example because that has become a symbol of American suffering and victimization, as well as American heroism and determination. Can we learn to see September 11 and its horror in the sufferings of other peoples and nations? Can the Israelis learn to see something of the Holocaust in the suffering and humiliation of the Palestinians, or will they forever see only their own suffering and displacement? Can the Palestinians learn to see their own pain and outrage in the long homelessness and marginalization of the Jewish people?

"Well you don't see my side!" people are always saying. Do I see their side? Do they see mine? Do we even want to?

"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit. . . ." What a wimp! He's bigger, stronger, and thinks he's smarter, and it's all her fault? What is this division between the two God-given partners in the human community? The two are given to each other because we need each other in life and not only as married couples but as men and women in society and in the world. God created us together in what Genesis calls the "image and likeness of God" – "male and female" *together*. How did we end up with faceless women in burkas and faceless girlyies in the office? What folly of sin is it that makes so many men in our world afraid of the very strength we need from our partners in our humanity, in the image of God? We need to think through what manhood, womanhood, honor, and dignity really mean because our world has substituted dominance for dignity and brutality for honor. We and our world need to learn that fear is not respect and submission is not partnership.

If we can learn to see images of our own pain in the sufferings of others, we can start to listen. People may even go further and see images of God's suffering in the pain of people toward whom they have been hostile or just indifferent. The cross takes many forms in our world: slave

ships, bread lines, death squads, closed doors of opportunity, and labels that speak contempt and hatred.

Let me conclude with a modern story of the cross, a cruciform story in the image of the suffering and death of the Son of God. In his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas L. Friedman tells of a father, a Druse merchant, and his fifteen-year-old son who had already fought against the Christians in the Lebanese Civil War. “See this boy?,” the father says with pride. “He was in the fight, too.” Then, the boy speaks: “I was in school, but I quit and came here because they were killing our people. If we don’t fight they will kill us all.” A few weeks later, Friedman related the story to a psychologist who counseled Lebanese students deeply affected by all the fighting. The counselor said this: “When will there be peace in Lebanon? When the Lebanese start to love their children more than they hate each other.”¹⁷

Whose problem is the healing of the human community? It is the problem of all who love their children, which certainly makes it God’s problem. And ours. Amen.

Comment One: Lamech

An obscure character in Genesis, Lamach is a descendent of Cain who boasts to his wives of his brutality:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. (Genesis 4:23,24 NRSV)

In the Old Testament, numbers are used expressively. Sevenfold revenge is not literally 6 + 1 of the enemy killed for every one of Cain’s tribe; it is full, complete retaliation. Likewise, seventy-sevenfold is not a literal numerical count, either, but wholesale and almost unlimited revenge. Jesus uses the same contrast to create a new spirit in human relations, that of forgiveness. When Simon Peter asks how many times he must forgive his brother who sins against him, as many as seven times (a full measure), Jesus says not seven, but seventy-seven (or seventy times seven, as a variant reading). In the spirit of Lamech, revenge governs human relations, and in Lamech and his kind of person that spirit flows freely, without limits. In the spirit of Jesus, grace governs human relations, and that spirit also flows freely to reverse the tide of revenge. Using a different image, we can say that revenge moves in cycles, as one hostile group takes vengeance upon the other; round and round it goes, and truly no one can say when or where it will stop. Jesus seeks to establish new cycles of understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, p. 230.

Lamech is in our newspapers and on our televisions almost every day. As I write these words, the morning paper tells of another suicide attack in Jerusalem and of reactions to it. The article says, “Ultraorthodox Jews stood behind police barricades, shouting, ‘Death to the Arabs . . . We want revenge.’ Some held up signs reading: ‘It’s us or them.’”¹⁸ Where is Lamech? He’s on both sides, bragging still about his vengeance. The article told us that Ariel Sharon has committed Israel to taking more Palestinian territory in retaliation for every attack, even as militant Palestinian groups commit themselves to ceaseless suicide bombings as long as Israelis occupy Palestinian territory. So, both sides have committed themselves to doing exactly what the other requires to keep warfare and death ongoing. Lamech is having the time of his life. From his viewpoint, things couldn’t be going better. From God’s, how could they be going worse?

“We want revenge.” In the name of our God, we want revenge. Does anyone want peace with justice? Can anyone see the other’s suffering?

Comment Two: Conclusion?

Every book must come to an end, but this one cannot reach a conclusion. September 11 is not over; for at least three reasons, it continues to be a present reality for us. The first and most obvious is that the grief of that terrible day continues for those left behind and, to some extent, for all of us. The attacks and threats of attack on America also continue because the hatred of America persists and may even be increasing in parts of the world. And, September 11 continues because it was not an isolated American event but part of a worldwide linkage of conflicts and hostilities. What happened in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania cannot be separated from what is happening in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

The questions persist, also. As long as people suffer senselessly, as long as we inflict pain or deprivation upon each other, as long as God’s promises and the world’s realities continue to contradict each other, the questions will and must persist. In many ways, it seems more important that we keep asking the questions than that we settle on answers—unless, of course, our settled answers can actually change the world’s conditions and overcome the contradictions to God’s love and mercy, which they cannot. Otherwise, answers often serve only to harden positions and hearts. Instead of formulating answers as explanations, we hold to the promises of God in the midst of the world’s turmoil, evil, and suffering. At the same time, we also see and affirm much in the world and in human life that is noble, that comes from love, friendship, integrity, and honor. The world is a mess, but it is a messy world God loves, and so we must love it, too. The book’s focus on September 11 does not suggest beauty or lightheartedness, but there is still much in our world of kindness and joy. That day last September has given us much to grieve but, also, much to admire in humanity.

¹⁸ Michael Matza and Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Thursday, June 20, 2002, p. A14.

In one paragraph, the sermon speaks specifically of Bridgeton, New Jersey, where it was preached. I almost removed that paragraph, thinking perhaps there was no need to discuss my particular community in the book. I left the paragraph in because Bridgeton is not unique, and we all live in particular communities, and healing is needed in every one of them. All New Jersey is filled with people of various races, nationalities and ethnic groups, religions, and languages. So is America. So is the world. For me, Bridgeton is of particular concern because my family and I have made our home here for nearly seventeen years, and as a community Bridgeton struggles to bring its different groups of people together. May the struggle continue with that goal in mind: to bring us together.

It is important, I believe, that we see the work of healing and reconciliation as a unified task. Small strife is related to larger scale strife. The way people get treated in towns and villages around the world relates to the conflicts among nations. The ways men and women treat each other in everyday interactions perpetuates itself, for good or evil, to the next generations.

The sermon ends with the children, and so should the book. Jesus says the kingdom of God is for them. The Bible presents the fracturing of the human community as the evil done by our turning from God. So, then, is the healing of the human community not to be a result of God's reclaiming us and turning us back to grace? Whose problem is the healing of humanity's hurts and conflicts? It is the problem of all who love their children, and it is certainly the problem of all who follow Jesus and call him Savior, Redeemer, and Lord.

ADDENDUM: THE LABEL "CHRIST KILLER"

In the comment on the sermon preached for the Interfaith Community Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, reference is made to the label "Christ Killer" applied to the Jewish people. The purpose of this addition to the book is not to review the history of the Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews in general or that hateful label in particular, but to refute the twisted theology that could produce such a label in the first place. The question is not, "Who plotted, arranged, or carried out the execution of Jesus?" but, "Who bears responsibility for his crucifixion?" The only theologically legitimate Christian answer to that question is twofold: "I bear that responsibility personally, and we bear it together."

Jesus suffered and died for me and, also, because of me. Whenever I eat the bread and share the cup of the Lord's Supper, I am confessing both that the love and mercy which took Jesus to the cross are given to me and that God's love and mercy had to be given in such a horrible way *because of me*. When Christians confess Jesus died for their sins, they are saying exactly that—for *their sins*. We are admitting our sin is the reason for his crucifixion. If I bear no responsibility for his suffering and death (which would mean I had no sin), then I have no place at the Lord's Supper because it is not for me. Jesus said he did not come to call the righteous but sinners.

Likewise, we bear responsibility for his crucifixion together as the world and, especially, as his church. We have communion in the sacramental remembrance of his suffering and death because it is only by his suffering and death that we are united with God and with each other. People who are not guilty of his crucifixion need not and should not be part of his church. Furthermore, they need no salvation in him and can have none.

From the standpoint of Christian theology and faith, if Jews alone were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, then Jews alone could have salvation in and through him. The rest of us would stand outside the need for salvation and the possibility of it. As Christ's church, the communion of people who put their faith in him, we find both our guilt and our forgiveness at the cross. In Jesus' crucifixion, we see our alienation from God, each other, and ourselves, but we find also our reconciliation with God, each other, and ourselves.

The Christian hymn, "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended," expresses the confession of all who find salvation in Jesus' suffering and death. The second stanza says:

Who was the guilty? Who brought his upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee.¹⁹

How, then, and why did the church ever develop the notion that the Jews bore sole or even primary responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion, that they were the "Christ Killers"? Historically, there are probably many answers combining the human need for scapegoats with greed and sadism. Theologically, the answer lies in the church's abandonment of the *theology of the cross* in favor of the *theology of glory*, also called *triumphalism*.

The Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall traces this change extensively in his three volume work, *Christian Theology in a North American Context*,²⁰ but here a brief summary will serve. After the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, when Christianity became the established religion of the empire, the church became less and less the servant, more and more the ruler. The Christ exalted at the right hand of God the Father Almighty suited such a church much better than the suffering and humiliated Christ crucified. So, the theology of the cross and the way of humble service were put aside in favor of a theology of glory and a way of power and prestige. The rulers of the church became the regents on earth of the exalted Christ in heaven.

¹⁹ Johann Heermann, c. 1630, translation by Robert Bridges, 1899.

²⁰ The contrast between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory runs throughout the work's three volumes, but an introduction to it may be found in the first volume, *Thinking the Faith*, pp. 22ff.

The cross, however, could not be ignored or forgotten because Jesus' crucifixion is much too prominent in the New Testament and too central to Christian faith as a whole. Jesus' cross stands as our primary symbol. No, the cross had to be kept, but the Christian understanding of it could be twisted to serve the needs of a church triumphant. The resurrection could be seen as Christ's triumph over the evil done to him in his crucifixion, rather than as God's vindication of his suffering love for the world's people. Christians could see themselves as the church of the resurrected and exalted Christ. Who, then, did the evil to Jesus in his crucifixion? Who represents the vanquished killer? The theology of glory required an evildoer over whom to triumph, and the church's choice was the Jew. It was easy. The Jews were a people set apart, and they had rejected Jesus as their Messiah. So, they became the scapegoats for triumphalist Christianity. In times of pervasive ignorance and superstition, it was also easy to develop ridiculous but hateful *blood accusations* against the Jews and silly but effectively alienating legends such as that of the "Wandering Jew."

Not the Jews, not the Romans, but I am responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus—I, the church, and the humanity in which I and the church both participate. The church is the communion of faith in Jesus that accepts this responsibility and the salvation his crucifixion brings, but the church is not the exclusive recipient of the love and mercy of God Jesus embodies in his brokenness on the cross. He suffered and died because God so loves the world. By accepting ourselves as the people for whom and because of whom (and so, in that sense, *by whom*) Jesus was crucified, we commit ourselves to living as the people of the crucified Christ and following him in the way of the cross. We, therefore, are committed, not to the way of power and prestige, but to the path of a love that is willing to suffer. The church should always be a servant people.

By choosing a scapegoat to hate and persecute for the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians deny their own belonging to him in his crucifixion and renounce their own salvation. By teaching contempt for Jesus' own people, the Jews, Christians heap their contempt upon him. Ridding ourselves of the label "Christ Killer" and all it represents as it has been applied to the Jewish people is not just a matter of tolerance, kindness, or open-minded pluralism; it goes to the very heart of our confession of faith in Jesus and to being his people, his church. If he did not suffer and die for us and because of us, then we have no place in him.

The hymn already quoted, "Ah, Holy Jesus," after confessing responsibility (and guilt) for his death, goes on:

For me, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation,
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion,
For my salvation.