

Mistakes Were Made
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Tennessee Valley UU Church
Knoxville, TN 37919
Sunday, September 16, 2001
(A sermon in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001)

Reading:

Our reading for today comes from the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. I want apologize in advance because Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor at a time when gender inclusive language was not a high priority. And yet I feel we can still learn from his thoughts.

"A branch severed from an adjoining branch necessarily becomes severed from the whole tree. A man, likewise, who has been divided from any of his fellows has thereby fallen away from the whole community. But whereas the branch is lopped by some other hand, the man by his feelings of hatred or aversion, brings about his own estrangement from his neighbor, and does not see that at the same time he has cut himself off from the whole framework of society. Nevertheless it is in our power, by grace of Zeus the author of all fellowship, to grow back and become one with our neighbor again, so playing our part once more in the integration of the whole. Yet if such acts of secession are repeated frequently, they make it difficult for the recusant to achieve this reunion and restitution. A branch which has been partner of the tree's growth since the beginning, and has never ceased to share its life, is a different thing from one that has been grafted in again after a severance. As the gardeners say, it is of the same tree, but not of the same mind."

Sermon

The title for this sermon was chosen in a more lighthearted moment on Monday; a day before the terrorist attack and the collapsing of the World Trade Center. A political cartoon I saw years ago inspired the original title. I can't remember if the cartoon was satirizing George Bush, Sr. or Bill Clinton. Perhaps, it doesn't matter. There was a picture of the president as a young child being confronted in the kitchen by his mother for eating a pie without permission. There was pie on his face, his clothes, and the floor. His fingerprints were smudged all over the kitchen counter. The young president was looking up into his mother's eyes. He had an earnest expression on his face and he was saying, "Mistakes were made."

The phrase "mistakes were made" is a common political dodge. It allows the politician to admit that something was done wrong without admitting who did it. But that is not what we are here to talk about today. The attack of September 11 was a deliberate and intentional act of aggression. This was no dodge or accident. And so we need to think about this issue in a different way.

One of the occupational hazards of being a minister is that we have to talk about forgiveness during times when forgiveness seems impossible. Tomorrow evening at sundown is Rosh Hashanah; the beginning the High Holy Days of the Jewish calendar and the Jewish New Year. It is a time to seek forgiveness from those whom we may have hurt over the past year. It is also a time to offer forgiveness to those who have harmed us. It is a custom that allows each person to

start a new year with an ethical clean slate. To begin again. And it has been my custom to talk about forgiveness during this season every year.

And yet it is difficult for me to talk about forgiveness today. There is a gaping hole in New York City and in Washington and there is a gaping hole in the lives of many families and among many circles of friends. There are certain people and certain symbolic buildings that we think of as being reliable, dependable, and when they are gone the absence is felt in a deep and powerful way. On September 11, 2001 a wound was inflicted. This is a wound that will not easily heal. This is a limb that will not be easily grafted back on to the tree.

As we enter into this season of forgiveness let me say something that I believe to be profoundly true. I believe deep in my heart that it is more important to be honest than it is to be forgiving. For if we are honest, we will know the moment when genuine forgiveness takes hold of our heart. We do not have as much control over our emotions as we would like to think. So today may be the day we need to feel angry or sad or shocked or bitter. There may be a thousand other emotions that we need to feel before we arrive at a place where we even want to hear the word forgiveness. And that's okay.

It may be insensitive and even cruel to utter the word forgiveness before all the bodies have been found, before all the missing have been accounted for, before every family has been notified of the fate of their loved one, before most of the memorial services have been held and the people of this country have overcome the shock and begun to truly grieve. And yet one of the reasons we have seasons like the High Holy Days is so that we will talk about forgiveness when it is inconvenient and difficult. So that our sermons and our worship services on forgiveness will not be saved for sunny days or hopeful moments or easy times.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. certainly knew something about forgiveness in difficult circumstances. Forgiveness in the face of the bomb planted in his home in Montgomery, in the face of the murder of civil rights workers, in the face of the bombing of the church in Birmingham and the death of girls attending Sunday School. Dr. King understood that forgiveness was not a substitute for justice. Forgiveness was a spiritual discipline that could empower one to work for greater justice in the world. He argued that when we refuse to forgive we hurt ourselves. When we refuse to forgive we can become hateful people. When we hate we injure ourselves as well as others. He compared hate to an unchecked cancer that corrodes the personality and eats away at our vital unity. Hate destroys our sense of values and our objectivity. And we see a visible example of this with the hijackers who were consumed, along with their victims, in the fires of their own hatred.

There will be calls for military action and political posturing in the days ahead. But these solutions will be fruitless unless we address some of the larger problems of the human spirit. World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars. After WW I there was an effort to start a League of Nations to put an end to war for all time. When this organization was formed Winston Churchill gave his support to it but pointed out one of its potential problems. He told one audience in 1920; "I am in favor of a League of Nations. But what is wanted to make the League of Nations a success is a League of Nations spirit. The world would have no use for a League of revengeful nations, or a League of jealous and callous nations, or a League of selfish

and greedy nations. What is wanted is a League of brave, strong, merciful nations, seeking unitedly the peace and glory of mankind."

Underneath the geopolitical equations there are problems of the human spirit. The League of Nations failed. The United Nations struggles with some of the same issues. We see these struggles in some of the more bitter and contentious U.N. meetings that have been held of late. Good political ideas are important but these ideas need to be grounded in a deeper sense of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people; the oneness of humanity and the oneness of Creation. We need nations that are not only united in name. We need nations united in spirit.

I once heard the Dalai Lama of Tibet give an address about World Peace at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. After his talk he was asked to state his views about disarmament. He said outer disarmament must go hand in hand with inner disarmament. For if we get rid of all the outward weapons; the nuclear bombs, the automatic machine guns etc. we can still hit each other with sticks and beat each other with our hands. World peace is not simply a political problem. It is an inner spiritual problem. And we have to look within for some of the answers. We must look within to see if there is anger or resentment or fear. To see if some of the seeds of war are not growing in our own hearts.

Of course, not everyone leads the examined life. There are many armchair warriors who called the radio stations right after the attack and said things like, "Let's bomb the hell out of them." The callers made these comments before it was even clear who "they" were or where "they" were located. The desire to retaliate can be so strong that innocent people can be hurt. In the past the desire for justice has led to both good and evil. The impulse has produced fair trails but it has also produced lynch mobs and in some cases it has resulted in the death penalty being imposed on innocent people.

Real war is messy thing. In war the bombs fall on the just and the unjust and the shrapnel rises killing the evil and the good. The desire to do justice must be tempered by the knowledge that real war is no Nintendo game. Real people get hurt...men, women and children. That is why the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, once said that even in the most just war, "Victory must be observed like a funeral."

The president has called this a conflict between good and evil, and this may be true but only if we remember the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "The dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." The desire for justice can be perverted and lead to stereotyping and scapegoating. Our Arab and Muslim neighbors are already getting harassing phone calls. Windows were shot out of a mosque in Texas. We must be careful not to judge an entire ethnic group or an entire religion by the actions of a handful of extremists.

Islam is a religion that is often stereotyped in the media as a religion of terrorists. But Islam was the religion of Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, who signed a peace treaty with Israel, and was a martyr to the cause of peace in the Middle East. Islam was the religion of Badshah Khan, who worked side by side with Mahatma Gandhi for nonviolent social change. Khan lived in what we now called Pakistan and he organized a nonviolent movement among the Pathans who were known throughout the land for their "eye for eye" approach to revenge. Khan is almost forgotten

today. However, Badshah Khan was arguably a more effect organizer for nonviolence than Gandhi. He worked in places where it was far more difficult to convert people to the doctrine of nonviolence. Badshah Khan once said, "The Holy Prophet Mohammed came into this world and taught us: 'That man is a Muslim who never hurts anyone by word or deed, but who works for the happiness of all God's creatures. Belief in God is to love one's fellow men.'"

I have made it one of my life's tasks to study the religions of the world and let me assure you there is no major religion in the world that would condone what happened on September 11. When Christians in Bosnia attacked Muslims an orthodox bishop said something I think people of all faiths can agree with. He declared, "Violence in the name of God is violence against God. Violence in the name of any religion is violence against all religions."

And so if we are angry today let's take personal responsibility for it. If we want to retaliate let's say "I am angry." Or "I want to retaliate." Let's keep God and religion out of it. Do not pollute these waters. There are many that may need to drink from this river of life.

Islam is a diverse religious tradition. In the Sufi Muslim tradition (a mystical branch of Islam) we find teachers like Ibn Arabi who practice a religion that seeks the deepest truth at the heart of all the world's religions. Arabi once wrote, "My heart is open to every form. It is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols...the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Koran. I practice the religion of love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of love shall be my religion and my faith."

Arabi's comment might have been the inspiration for the Muslim poet Rumi who wrote the words we sang at the beginning of this service, "Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again come." In this church we believe in working for peace among people of all faiths. We practice the religion of love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, ours is no caravan of despair, the religion of love shall be our religion, our faith and our hope. At its best, the religion of love allows us to seek justice without becoming bitter, to hold people accountable for their actions without hatred, to avoid the temptation to respond to blind hatred with blind hatred; and to respond with wisdom, determination and a resolve that is grounded in the better dimensions of the human spirit.

The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church is a religious community where we are called to affirm life in the wake of so much death, to affirm love in the face of hate. To give thanks for the beauty of creation in the face of destruction. To affirm community in the aftermath of chaos. We are called to work with people of all faiths for the common good. The attack on the World Trade Center and on Washington D.C. resulted in the deaths of people of all faiths. It will take people of all faiths to work together to rebuild from the wreckage and renew the ties that bind us to each other as fellow citizens of our city, our nation and the world.

Tomorrow is the beginning of the High Holy Days; a time of forgiveness when forgiveness seems impossible. But forgiveness is not an impossible ideal. In fact the salvation of the earth depends on it. There had to be forgiveness before Anwar Sadat could sit down with Menachem Begin and work out peace between Israel and Egypt. There had to be forgiveness before Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat could even talk to each other let alone shake hands and agree to continue

their work. And there will have to be forgiveness one day for September 11, 2001 if there is to peace in the Middle East and on the earth. We may not feel it today or tomorrow or for many days to come. But sooner or later we must all realize that this is one world for all its sorrow; "one world shaping one tomorrow; one humanity, though riven, we, to whom a world is given. From one world there is no turning; for one world the prophets yearning. One, the world of poets, sages; one world, goal of all the ages."(Hymn 133, "One World," Vincent B. Silliman).

Amen.