Children and Church: Reflections in the Week After September 11th

Linda Hansen
Peoples Church UU
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Before I begin this sermon, I need to say that I have never felt the weight of the pulpit, or of being a minister, more than this week. Yesterday, as I worked on this sermon, I realized I was somewhat frantically trying to grasp all the news on the radio and in the newspaper, read all the sermons and letters coming from the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee, and reread everything I could think of related to children and church and hope. In short, I realized I was trying to figure out how to say everything, and how to say it perfectly, perhaps because I myself feel so much in need of all the right words just now.

And when I realized that, I took a breath and said to myself,

OK, Linda, time to practice what you preach. No one expects you to say everything, or to say anything perfectly; no one expects you to have all the answers. Say some of what you are thinking and feeling, and trust what you've learned so deeply over the past seven years--that the benevolent listeners of Peoples Church will forgive the gaps and mistakes and limitations. More than that, they will fill in the gaps and correct the mistakes and offer their own wisdom and love. Truth is possible only in community, Linda, just like love.

And so I offer this sermon as one voice among all of ours--inside and outside of this congregation--seeking the path of truth, and one heart among all of ours seeking the path of love.

It seems ironic that, last Tuesday morning, I was set to pay close attention to an NPR story on education when Bob Edwards broke in with the news that a plane had hit the World Trade Center in New York City. I was looking forward to Susan Stamberg's interview with a young man just beginning his teaching career--a young man who had had very little interest in school until a high school teacher took a special interest in him. As I looked forward to the interview, I thought with gratitude of the teachers in our religious education program and all the adult volunteers who work with our children and youth--people who, like this young man's teacher and now this young man himself, make a difference for the better in our children's lives.

What moves me about this young teacher and the teacher who inspired him, and all the teachers and volunteers at Peoples Church, is that their care for our children is an exercise in hope. And now, just as the radio interview was interrupted by the horrible events of last Tuesday, so have our own lives and work been interrupted, and perhaps so has our hope.

Writer and teacher Scott Russell Sanders tells of a painful encounter he had with his son, Jesse, on a camping trip meant to bring them closer together (*Hunting for Hope: A Father's Journeys*, Beacon Press, 1998). Instead Jesse, overwhelmed by his father's criticisms of the state of our world, accused his father of giving him despair.

"You've got me seeing nothing but darkness," [Jesse] tells me, his voice cracking with pain. "I have to believe there's a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what's the point? Why study, why work, why do anything if it's all going to hell?"

I cannot scour from my vision the darkness that troubles my son [Sanders goes on], because I have witnessed too much suffering and waste. I know too much about what humans are doing to one another and to the planet. I cannot answer Jesse's questions about hope, or [my daughter's], or those of my students, by pretending that I see no reasons for despair. Anyone who pays attention to the state of the world knows that we are in trouble. Anyone who looks honestly at the human prospect realizes that we face enormous challenges: population growth, environmental degradation, extinction of species, ethnic and racial strife, doomsday weapons, epidemic disease, drugs, poverty, hunger, and crime, to mention only a few. These stark realities press on my mind as I write. . . . (185)

These words of Scott Russell Sanders were published three years ago. At this moment it is not necessary to pay *close* attention to the state of the world to know we are in trouble. To all the enormous challenges Sanders names, and out of some of them, we add the horrors of the last week and the fears of what may yet come.

But Sanders goes on, and I believe would still go on, even after the events of this past week: "[But] they are not the only realities, nor the most powerful nor durable ones. I see light shining in darkness. I live in hope" (185-186). But where, in the midst of all these problems and the events of last week, do we find hope? And how do we give hope to our children?

At a time in her own life when there was apparently little reason for hope, writer Anne Lamott found it in the congregation of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church ((*Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Pantheon Books, 1999).

When I was at the end of my rope [she writes], the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home*--that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now" (100).

I do not know the particular circumstances that brought Anne Lamott to the end of her rope, though it sounds as if single parenthood and poverty may have been among them. But when Lamott, early in her pregnancy, announced to her congregation that she was going to have a baby, the congregation cheered. "They brought clothes," she adds, "they brought me casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be a part of the family. And they began slipping me money" (101).

What makes the gifts of money in Lamott's story especially moving is that the congregation to which she belongs is full of people--many of them older, many of them African-American--with very little money themselves. Yet it was the older black women who slipped tens and twenties into Lamott's pockets, and one older black woman named Mary Williams who brought Lamott little plastic Baggies filled with dimes. Years later, she still does.

Mary doesn't know that professionally I'm doing much better now; she doesn't know that I no longer really need people to slip me money. But what's so dazzling to me, what's so painful and poignant, is that she doesn't bother with what I think she knows or doesn't know about my financial life. She just knows we need another bag of dimes, and that is why I make Sam go to church (104-105).

Anne Lamott doesn't need the dimes, but she and her son Sam need the kindness of people who give even more than they can afford out of love. I'm struck by the connection between this reflection on Mary William's dimes, which which Lamott ends her essay on "Why I Make Sam Go to Church," and the more general reflection with which she begins her essay and we began our service this morning. Let us hear those words again.

. . . I want to give [Sam] what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want--which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy--are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, [Muslims]--people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. . . . Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food (100).

Clearly the beginning and the end of Lamott's essay speak to the same need--the need for *kindness*--not just the kindness of particular acts like Mary Williams' gifts of dimes, but the vision that underlies them: that we creatures of this earth are all "of a kind," that we are all more alike than different, that we are all in this world together, and that we must work to see beyond and to undo all the prejudices and artificial barriers that blind us to our real connection to one another and tear our world apart.

Why do we bring our children to church? Why do we come ourselves? I hope it is because here is a place--not the only place, but an important place--where we try hard to correct the skewed vision we so often find in the larger world. In the larger world, it's too easy to believe that things matter more than people, that the animals and plants of the world matter only insofar as they serve our immediate desires, that people with money matter more than people without it, that young people matter more than older ones, that beautiful people matter more than plain ones, that lighter-skinned people matter more than darker-skinned ones, that straight people matter more than lesbian or gay people, that people who are like me in skin-color or sexual orientation or religion or political party matter more than people who aren't, that I (and perhaps my family) matter more than anybody else. I'm not immune to the power of these prejudices; I suspect none of us is. But here we try to do just what Lamott's congregation of St. Andrew Presbyterian is doing: we seek by particular acts of kindness to create a community that challenges and transcends these prejudices, and we seek to bring our vision of "kindness"--that all of us are "of a kind"--to life in the larger world. Of course we fall short in both efforts; like everyone else we can be unkind, like everyone else we can be blinded by our own prejudices. But we keep coming to church because we believe that we and others can grow and change; we keep coming to church because we have some hope and because we need more of it.

Let me be more specific. I am deeply troubled by the language we are now hearing from some of our political leaders that this is a war of "good vs. evil," and that our response to this tragedy will be to "rid the world of evil." Yes, what was done to us in the United States this week was evil, and we must work to eradicate terrorism from our world. But to take the posture that we in the United States are purely good, while those who oppose us are purely evil, is surely to mirror the mindset of the terrorists themselves, who no doubt thought of their cause as the good one and us as the evil presence in the world.

It is here in church that we can be reminded, and can teach our children, that human beings are not divisible into good ones and bad ones; every single one of us has the capacity for good and for evil, and until we face up to our own worst potentials, we cannot achieve our best. We have seen powerful and moving examples of good in our country this week--courage, compassion, self-sacrifice, generosity. And we have seen shameful examples of evil in our country this week--especially in those people who have been threatening or attacking mosques or individual Muslims or people of Arab descent. As UUA President Bill Sinkford reminds us, if we are going to use the analogy of Pearl Harbor, we must "remember also that Pearl Harbor led to the impounding and imprisonment of thousands of innocent Japanese Americans" ("Letter to Colleagues," UUA website, September 13, 2001).

It grieves me that my goddaughter, married to a man in Bahrain, is afraid to come home to the States now with her husband and their child. And it heartens me to witness groups like the Inter-Religious Council of Linn County and so many individuals in our community and others stressing our solidarity with our Muslim neighbors who are grieving as deeply this week as the rest of us.

At the same time as I am troubled by some of the language of our political leaders, including President Bush, I cannot imagine the burden and weight of their responsibility just now. I was moved to note President Bush's tears this week, and troubled to hear him criticized for not being "strong" enough to hold them back. I hope in this church our children will learn that an openness to feelings, to vulnerability, is among the true marks of strength. And I hope that President Bush's compassion will help him to guide us wisely in this time.

The hope that Scott Russell Sanders offers to his son, Jesse, and to us is not an easy one--not a hope that we can make everything all right; not a hope easy to live out.

My search for hope [he writes] has convinced me that we *can* change our ways of seeing and thinking and living. We can begin living responsibly and alertly right where we are, right now, no matter how troubled we may be about the human prospect. If we set out to solve the world's problems, we are likely to feel overwhelmed. On the other hand, if we set out to act on our deepest concerns and convictions we may do some good. We can begin making changes in our own lives without waiting for such changes to become popular, without knowing whether they will have any large-scale effect, but merely because they are right (*Hunting for Hope*,186).

The kind of changes Sanders suggests are, not surprisingly, just the kind of changes so many people in our "funky little church" are already trying to make--living more simply, being responsible consumers, caring about our families and neighbors and communities, doing public

service, participating in our democracy, putting the common good ahead of our individual interests (186-187).

Whether all such efforts, added together, will be enough to avert disaster and bring about a just and enduring way of life, no one can say. In order to live in hope we needn't believe that everything will turn out well. We need only believe that we are on the right path (186).

And that is just why Anne Lamott brings her son Sam to church--so that he too will have "a path and a little light to see by," and so that Sam will know he never has to walk that path alone. I don't have children, but I do know that when my vision or my courage or my will falters, you are there to help me stay on the path--whether your help comes in the form of baggies full of dimes or other particular acts of kindness or the many models you provide of ways to make a difference in the world.

I did one more thing yesterday when I was feeling overwhelmed by the task of writing a meaningful sermon. I remembered another of Robert Fulghum's stories--how, when he is depressed or feeling overwhelmed by the world, he listens to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the symphony Beethoven never heard himself because he was deaf when he wrote it. And so I turned off the radio and listened to Beethoven's Ninth. "In the midst of oatmeal days," Fulghum says, "I find within Beethoven's music an irresistible affirmation" (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Ballantine Books, 1986, 1988, 112).

Julie Hanson told me that our country's new poet laureate, Billy Collins, when asked this week what poem might be good to turn to, replied that (in Julie's words) "any poem one might turn to, any poem even arbitrarily opened, would be against this. Poetry, he said, is about life, and about love." As I listened to Beethoven, as I read Julie's words, as I too found myself turning to poetry this past week, I felt glad that here in our church we teach our children that "sacred texts" are not limited to the Scriptures of any particular religious view, but can be found as well in the art and music and literature of our diverse world. In the midst of so much negation, we and our children need all the sources of "irresistible affirmation" we can find.

How important that affirmation is now, whether it comes in the form of symphonies or poems or birthday parties like the one for Tom Moss to which we're all invited at the end of this service. UU minister Frederick Wooden, writing from Brooklyn this week, ended his open letter to friends across the country (UUA website, September 13, 2001) by saying:

People say that this [tragedy] reminds you of what is really important, and it does. But should not everyone [also] have the luxury of worrying about their own lives? . . . The playground, with a view of lower Manhattan and its smoldering sad skyline, was full of children [Wednesday]. They played and laughed.

And a little child shall lead.

Sometimes we help our children find the path; sometimes they guide us to it. The important thing is that here in our "funky little church" we are dedicated to finding that path together, and to helping keep one another on it, and to light it up as best we can for the rest of our weary and

hurting world. Please keep coming to church; please keep bringing your children. We need one another. We need the good company of congregations like St. Andrew Presbyterian Church and the Islamic Center and Temple Judah and so many others. And the world needs us.

So may it be.