

Ours Is No Caravan Of Despair
(Ingathering Service)
The Rev. Ms. Barbara J. Pescan
September 16, 2001

Call to worship

Come, come whoever you are
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving
Ours is no caravan of despair
Though you've broken your vows a thousand times:
Come, yet again, come.

-Rumi

Opening words

In times of trouble, we find our way to each other.
Through the smoke and fire, a rescuer reached out to a woman
clapping her hands so he would find her,
her throat hurt too much from the smoke to shout.
We must listen to each other
for sounds and words that may seem out of place,
that may mean other things at other times
to discern if people are in pain and in trouble.
We must find our way to each other.
There is no them and us. There is only us.
We must find our way to each other.
Through the smoke of ignorance and misunderstanding,
through the fire of hatred -
we must find our way to each other.
Through the words of war and retribution,
we must find our way to justice.
Through the haze of distorted images of ourselves and of others
we must find our way to larger truths.
We must find our way to each other.
Let us begin here,
As we gather again to be a religious community -
To teach, to learn, to comfort, to listen, to reflect
And to act, when we can, to heal the hurting world.
Let us begin here - where we are safe and care about each other -
and let us learn
how we may take that sense of care and safety into the world with us
both to keep us open and to help others.
Let us begin again. Let us begin together, here.

Pastoral Prayer

[Prayer at the end of the week in which terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and another attack was disrupted by the heroism of ordinary people]

LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET US GO:

We are a people who long to embrace life; who want to run open-armed into the world. Yet the devastation of the week's events stops us in our tracks; we huddle here in fear and trembling and disbelief.

Our shock and sorrow are boundless we all know someone or know someone who knows someone

We are desperate for our own safety, and those whom we love

In our outrage we are impatient for answers.

Our demands for explanations imply blame, imply responsibilities failed.

We want action now and our leaders have declared war.

And our desire to help is immediate and generous beyond measure.

NOW AND IN THE DAYS TO COME let us renounce the terror the terrorist would sow in our shattered hearts and minds.

Let us treat each other and all strangers with kindness and patience and renounce suspicion born of our fears.

Let us reassure and encourage each other so that together we find the strength to keep our desperation for security from imprisoning our hearts and minds and oppressing people whose lives we do not understand.

Let us focus our outrage against the practice of terror, wherever it arises.

But let us resist the temptation to demonize a whole nation or an entire people of faith.

Let us unite as a nation and support our leaders, yet let us not abdicate our questions, our perspectives, our values. Let our diverse nation stay in dialogue, for fundamentalisms of any kind can ignite the terrorist response.

In the midst of this full assault on life,

let us militantly practice the arts of living:

to breathe and savor each breath

to attend to the beauty of the natural world

to stay turned toward one another with open minds and expectant hearts

to seek the gift in each moment of engagement

to practice compassion toward all beings

and to go on in love.

LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET US GO

give us the courage to go on in love give us the courage to go on in peace

Amen
Blessed Be

-The Rev. Ann E. Tyndall

Homily

For the last five days I have been watching what is going on in the United States and the world. Probably you have, too. I have been listening to the words of the people who are our government. I have searched the words for wisdom and for hope in the face of the terror that came to the World Trade Center and to the Pentagon. I have searched the faces of my co-workers and of the strangers I meet. I have found what you have found-confusion, disbelief, people overwhelmed by heavy meanings just beyond our awareness. I have found that I have not been able to hold on to my thoughts for very long. With daily annoyances, I have felt in the same instant, both irritation and a sense that irritation with daily annoyances is a luxury now. I have found kindness in casual encounters in shops and at church. In short, I have found in the last five days reasons for fear and reasons for hope.

This Sunday, we are back in our sanctuary, very much a work in progress. It has new windows. We return to a home being redone by the virtue of so much generosity and so much hard work. This particular Sunday ingathering and water ceremony is a reminder that no matter how far we go in our time apart, we have this home to which to return. It is a reminder that water is everywhere the same-it satisfies our thirst, it cleans us; when we are hot we can swim in it to cool off; when we are cold, we can take a shower or bath to warm up a little. We put it on our plants so that the flowers and fruits and vegetables will grow and nourish us with their beauty and food.

Right now, we know that something horrible has happened to people not too far away from us. Some of you may know some of the people who were hurt and killed last Tuesday. The world is really pretty small, and just because we are far away from other people does not mean we are not connected to them. I want to say only a few things right now. I want the children to listen, too. If you don't understand all the words, that's okay. But, I do want you to know these words are for you, too; and for your parents, and for all of us.

First, things like this have always happened, and the beginning of this war has been "simmering for decades" (Forrester Church, 9-12-01). Wars have happened. Nations have been surprised by attacks from outside and inside their borders. Hatred and the capacity to do evil things are part of the human psyche; we all, in the right circumstances, have the capacity to do bad things; every person, every nation.

I have heard lots of words this week about big and little-how many, how quickly, how the people who should have known this might happen did not know. People are sad and angry, and our government is talking about punishing the people who planned the planes to crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But, things like this have always happened in the world. The purpose of terrorism is to terrorize, to make people change their behavior, make people afraid to live their lives, to frighten free people into being less free. Bullies do this every day; countries do

this to each other every day; some countries do this to their own people. Our own country is not free of the stain of having done bad things to people in other countries more than once.

But, the only thing that counters fear is love. Fear cannot take hold of us if we do not let it. We do not have to be afraid. There are lots of ways to fight our fear. One way to fight fear of others is to find out facts. Another way is to get to know other people better. If terrorism and fear have always existed, so have love and caring and kindness.

Things are going to change for us. We don't know exactly how, yet, but our lives will need to be different. Forrester Church, our minister at All Souls Church in New York City, said this on Wednesday night:

...these visions of a future rebuilt on yesterday's ashes may seem to contradict each other. Justice and mercy. Retribution and compassion. War and love. Yet they will only be at odds should we choose one vision in place of the other. On the one hand, if hatred and vengeance spur our lust for retribution, rather than the greater quest for peace, we will but add to the world's terror even as we seek to end it. On the other, if we pray only for peace, we shall surely abet the spread of terrorism. Our hands will end up far bloodier than those that lift up arms against it.

...This is not a war...between civilizations. It is a war between civilization and anarchy, a war of God-demented nihilists against the very fabric of world order. I hope you will all go out of your way in the days ahead to practice the second great commandment and love your Arab neighbors as yourself. Few outside the circle of those who lost loved ones in Tuesday's tragedy are more surely its victims than are the millions of innocent Muslims whose God's name has been taken so savagely in vain.

I heard someone say that it is America's turn to experience fear and terrorism. I don't think that is fair, but I do think a lot of people feel we have been safer than they have been from the kind of violence we saw on Tuesday. Just because we are the last superpower; just because we live good lives; just because, as a country, we have so much; just because our country has been relatively free of war on our soil-these are not reasons enough to think it is "our turn" to experience violence. Just because these things are true, doesn't mean we deserve to be attacked. There is no circumstance that justifies terrorism.

But, as I heard a high school student on the radio say this week, if we refuse to honor the Kyoto Accords on cleaning up the environment, if we refuse to honor the ABM treaty, if we refuse to cooperate with other countries in helping build the world's economies, if we refuse, as a government and as a community of businesses, to recognize that our wealth and position has been and continues to be gotten at the expense of many poor people all over the world...then, by our actions (not our words) we are telling the world what we think of others, and, at the very least, we have some thinking to do about how we go about being America in the world.

We aren't the richest, most powerful country in the world only because people here have worked hard for what they have, or because we are very, very lucky. Twice in this century this country has been involved in wars with the whole world taking sides. People did things to people in those wars that, at first, we could not believe. We did not take seriously enough the anger and hatred of

the people in countries who began those wars. We did not take seriously enough that we, that our actions, could have had something to do with feeding their anger and hatred. As a country, and as a way of life, we did not and do not take seriously enough the need to know other people and other cultures and to respect them. Our country's government and military often have taken steps to make sure "our" people are safe and hopeful, and not even everyone in the United States feels safe and cared for. But now that we are a global village, the whole world is "our" people. And we must learn about each other and care about each other all over the world.

You and I as individuals cannot make these changes happen. They will not happen by tomorrow or next year. But, we must begin to learn to do things differently so that these children will not live their lives in fear, and so that their children will not be trying to figure these same things out thirty, forty years from now.

What can we do? We are not policy makers who sit at the tables where big decisions are made. But we can make our thoughts known to those we have elected to govern us, and we can continue to be a voice for reason and restraint. Violence has never, ever ended violence. One of you sent me an article written by someone who had lived in Afghanistan for 35 years but now lives here. That person wrote:

The Taliban and bin Laden are not Afghanistan. They're not even the government of Afghanistan. The Taliban are a cult of ignorant psychotics who took over Afghanistan in 1997. Bin Laden is a political criminal with a plan (to pit a billion Muslims against the West). When you think Taliban, think Nazis. When you think bin Laden, think Hitler. And when you think "the people of Afghanistan" think "the Jews in the concentration camps." It is not only that the Afghan people had nothing to do with this atrocity. They were the first victims of the perpetrators. They would exult if someone would come in there, take out the Taliban and clear out the rats' nest of international thugs holed up in their country.

Africa and the Middle East and parts of Asia need assistance-they may need a latter day Marshall Plan. We and other countries have the technological and spiritual resources to help people up. In the meantime, we can recognize that the things we at this church have been doing are exactly the thing I am talking about-the United Power conversations, standing up for the rights of underpaid workers in this country, standing for racial justice and the civil rights of all people, helping the Transylvanian Unitarians continue in the face of poverty and the Romanian government's repression-these ways of uniting our lives to others' lives are exactly the kind of thing we need to do to care about the rest of the world.

In our neighborhoods, and at our jobs and at our schools, we can also be kind, we can listen. We can keep in our minds that Muslims here and most Muslims in countries abroad are not the enemy. We can help each other have courage by helping when we can, and by listening when we are asked to listen, even when we think we have a better idea. We can give each other some room to think things through: as we have strong opinions today that will change tomorrow as we learn more and reflect more on what we have learned. And we will have to learn some things very quickly. One of our children's classes will shortly be visiting a mosque. Maybe we adults can seek out an opportunity to create a relationship with that mosque, to learn about Islam and

how Muslims live their values. I would like to start a group of us in a study of Islam. We are overdue, I think, to learn more about our neighbors.

We have the resources to be resources for each other. Sometimes, our good luck may make us feel as if we deserve all we have. We were lucky to be born or to land in this country. With our profound good luck, it seems to me, comes a responsibility to figure out what to do with all this bounty, all this reason, all this learning, all this freedom and possibility.

There is so much to do. There is so much to be. Our freedom is a gift and it calls us not just to live in freedom, but to be for freedom. Our free lives require us to do something with our freedom or we will lose it; it will be lost to us by neglect. Where we have enjoyed comfort, we now face challenge. Where there is ignorance, we will have to teach ourselves. Where we find fear and suspicion, each of us will have to be a presence that answers with restraint, with kindness, with attentive listening. This is not easy for us Americans, it is not easy for Unitarian Universalists—we like to think we know a lot, we are a "can do" bunch of folks who like fast and direct solutions to problems, and we like to argue for the sake of arguing. Something else is needed now. Some softening of our certainties. Some making room for the rest of the world to instruct us.

Our faith has been an easy faith, a haven from fundamentalisms and ignorance and empty pieties. This faith of freedom, reason and toleration requires of us, now and always, that we continue to become more muscular in our practice, that we stretch our understanding of what being liberally religious means in this world. I remind you of what you already know, that reason, freedom and toleration are not passive values. Love is not a hug and a smile. It is the capacity to stand for another in the face of fear. All these values require that we be willing to sacrifice our comforts and easy certainties to discern what may be done with and for others.

I want to leave with you with two messages from wise people. Long ago, Rabbi Hillel asked three questions, and Adrienne Rich added a fourth as a companion:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?
And, if not together, how? (*Adrienne Rich's addition.*)

And, not so long ago, a twelve year old girl, Anne Frank, wrote these words in her diary:
In spite of everything, I still believe
that people are really good at heart.
I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation
consisting of confusion, misery, and death.
I see the world gradually turned into a wilderness,
I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us, too,
I can feel the suffering of millions, and yet,
if I look up into the heavens,
I think it will all come out right,
that this cruelty will end,

and that peace and tranquility will return again.
In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals,
for perhaps the time will come
when I shall be able to carry them out.

When you bring your gathered water to this bowl, you acknowledge once again that you are part of this beloved community. This ritual is like when different people light the chalice each week in memory of all those who have gone before us. It is similar to bringing our individual flowers to our flower ceremony in the Spring. This ritual is a symbol that there is so much goodness and richness among us that comes together when we come together. It reminds us that in our time, we are free to join the loving community of this church, and this religious tradition, and be in this world. This congregation, all of us, are part of the living stream of souls that through time and across cultures have built our world and rebuilt it after times of trouble, and will do it again, this time.

Please, will you now bring forward the water you have gathered on your journeys and put it in this bowl with all the other water from near and far away. Doing this, you join our spirits with the lives of people in far off places who are just like us: who laugh and cry, who love, who learn and play, who work and mourn and dream of a world safe from fear and willing to do what needs to be done to bring the peace.

Do not allow your hatred to turn you away from justice, says the Quran.

From the murmur and subtlety of suspicion with which we vex one another, give us rest. Make a new beginning, and mingle again the kindred of the nations in the alchemy of love, and with some finer essence of forbearance, temper our minds. (Aristophanes, 400 BCE)

-The Rev. Barbara J. Pescan

Anthem

I will not leave you comfortless,
I will come to you again: Alleluia.
And your heart shall be joyful. Alleluia.
-Everett Titcomb