

**"Imperfect Solutions"**  
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As the nation begins to recover from the immediate emotional and physical damage of the September 11 attacks, we begin to wonder what our responses should be, both individually and as a people. As the initial shock of the disaster made itself known to us, it was clear that our first expressions must be grief at the magnitude of the loss, and anger at the terrible offense against human life. Especially for those of us who did not know anyone directly affected by the attack, however, the passage of time brings with it the need to shift our responses to something more sustainable in the long term. The rage and grief of those who lost family and friends will continue for months and perhaps years before evolving into something less intense, but those of us who are bystanders are already feeling the pull to return to our everyday lives. Psychologists tell us that within two or three weeks after a traumatic event, adults and children should notice a gradual decrease in the anxiety, sleeplessness, confusion and fear that many of us have been experiencing.

What is it, though, that we should be feeling afterward? What will replace the sorrow and anger that have filled our days and nights? We have so little experience with events like this, that none of us are prepared to respond, nor even know what a healthy response should be.

My colleague Rev. Jill McAllister was telling me about a woman who was watching the news with her young daughter, seeing the now too-familiar images of the World Trade Center exploding into flame. The little girl's response was, "Oh, it's so beautiful!" Her mother corrected her, "No, no, it's terrible." The girl explained, "Oh, I know that I feel sad for all those poor people, but the picture, it's so beautiful." She was still young enough not to be self-conscious about her response, and to see in that horror a terrible kind of beauty. Her response reminds us that beauty and tragedy elicit a similar response in us - that is, a new recognition of the preciousness of life, and a more urgent appreciation of our short time with one another. She also reminds us that none of us naturally know what the "right" response is. And so we as a nation and we as individuals grope for a response that will give us comfort, bring us safety, and make the world right again.

I thought a great deal this week about what I said to our children last Sunday. Promising that we would keep them safe is what the psychologists say that children need in this time of anxiety, and yet I have had to wonder what it means for us to keep that promise. I've felt very clear from the start about my revulsion at the macho rhetoric of "bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age," but I'm also beginning to feel the weight of my promise. I don't envy the President at a time like this, but I've also begun to see how similar is a minister's job. My colleagues and I have had to put aside our personal responses and spend the last two weeks in a state of professional detachment, trying to craft responses that speak to the broad trajectory of human needs, from those who are still deeply in shock to those who are trying to get back to business as usual. And the responsibility of the role means that I no longer am able simply to speak my own opinion, but

must also keep in mind my promises. My own personal pacifism is tempered by the realization that we have a promise to keep our children.

Our nation as well is struggling with its inexperience at shaping a response. We have had the superpower luxury of being able to direct missiles and engage troops on other nations' shores, and are caught quite unprepared with how to react to a hostile invasion of our own borders. After all, the continental United States has not been under siege since the war of 1812, when the British burned the White House. We wonder at the use of war language to describe the conflict we are in, because no words seem quite adequate. Certainly, to call it simply a "crime" or "hijacking" or even "terrorism" doesn't capture the national sense of urgency and threat, and yet calling it a "war" also feels somehow inappropriate. Commentators have noted that we can only speak about this as war in a metaphorical sense, as we have talked about "the war on drugs". When we think of war, we are accustomed to procedures like invasion, taking ground, of surrender and victory and peace treaty, none of which are likely in a war on terrorists. I understand the President's need to rally us all around a central purpose and establish that things are under control, but perhaps we would be wiser to speak about mobilizing forces than we would to raise expectations that this can be like any war in our experience.

Since my ministerial work is more about moral response than political response, I'll speak to that concern. As writer Susan Sontag notes, declaring that America is strong is not the only comfort I require - I need to know that we still intend to be a moral superpower as well, and that our responses will not violate our shared values. St. Augustine wrote that the greatest danger of war is not the physical harm it causes but the passions it inspires. I urge us to choose our next steps carefully, for they have the ability to dehumanize us as much as harm any enemy we declare war upon.

My colleagues and I have discovered that it's not popular to speak about our own nation's role in setting a stage where terrorism can flourish. It's been difficult to address these attacks in anything but black-and-white language these days, lest we be branded "unpatriotic". Of course none of us believes that Americans deserved as horrible a fate as this for our inept foreign policies. But it is a reminder that part of our moral awareness also needs to be on a long-term response that upholds the values that we profess as a nation. If we truly believe that freedom and justice are forces that liberate the human body and spirit, we need to be prepared to acknowledge that American globalization has often denied others the rights we so highly prize for ourselves. Again, what would give me comfort in these times is our commitment to being a moral superpower.

And what about that promise of safety I made to our children? Are we willing to trade away some of our values for the possibility of that safety? Martin Luther King wrote, "Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means." But is love a sufficient response to protect us and our families? At the moment, striking back seems to be more compelling a response than peaceful means.

Most frustrating for Americans, I think, has been the struggle to come to terms with the truth that no solution available to us is the perfect one. We want to be able to promise our children safety, and be able to keep that promise. And we want the freedoms and comfort that we have become

accustomed to. Security and liberty vie for our attention, and both are precious to us, but we are seeing that these two priorities sometimes work against each other. We could probably guarantee greater safety from terrorism if we drastically reduced personal freedoms, curtailing travel, monitoring telephone and e-mail communication, and placing special restrictions on anyone of the same nationality as our current enemies, but at what cost? In the words of Jesus, "what does it profit us to gain the world if we lose our own soul?" And one radio commentator remarked, "revenge is like drinking poison and hoping that your enemy dies". We have been hearing lately the observation that "everything is changed forever" by these attacks. This is as it should be, because human beings are not expendable. Not only are we being called to respond differently than we do in "normal" times, but we are shaped by the responses we choose. We are also changed forever.

In the days and months to come, we will be called to form moral responses as well as military ones. Peace will not mean America's simply getting its way and going on with no changes. Nor will it mean that we can rely on the same moral conclusions as individuals that worked for us in peacetime. What we can rely upon is the worth of our nation's values to guide us in the long term, and that someday we will look back in hope that we chose wisely and acted humanely, even in our response to terrible violence. It may seem that every response we consider has its shortcomings, but our duty to our children and the future is to respond in ways that leave a world intact for them to inherit, and preserve the values that make that world one worth occupying. We will need each other for support and comfort, and we will need each other at our best. Let us search our hearts in minds in the days ahead, that we choose from within our best selves how to respond. Amen.