

Choosing Our Enemies Carefully
Message by the Rev. Mark Hoelter
Service of Hope after the Attacks on Our Country
Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Hillsboro, Oregon
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Reading (exerpts from Dr. Forrest Church's message to those gathered in All Souls Church the evening of September 12, 2001):

"...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.

History supports each of these statements. In the first instance, we must recall history's most ironic lesson: Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them."

When I got home Friday evening, late for dinner, I felt totally exhausted. After dinner I had to go out for a few items and on my way to the store I had this urge. I just wanted to drive on, on to highway 26, on to one of the mountains, drive up to the top, turn off the car, lean the seat back and go to sleep until next week or so. I knew I was not alone.

I knew some of your stories and knew that all the emotions of the attack on our country had fallen like the towers themselves, fallen on top of already overloaded emotional systems. I knew how well deserved plans for time away had been disrupted for several of you, or how relatives were stranded. I learned that one of you made a proposal on your job that makes completely good sense in the light of what has happened. But it was not received well, and now, simply for speaking up, the level of your job and perhaps your job itself are in jeopardy. I know that one of you, who was on a special trip with friends out in the dessert, had no idea any of this had happened until you found out on Wednesday, a full day later. To both you and us it felt like a bad movie. Poet Andrei Condrescu on NPR said, "We're all waiting for Bruce Willis to come and bring an end to this terrible plot." And I felt so exhausted.

On Tuesday evening we managed to pull together a service; partly we made it up as we went along. That same evening, hours earlier, a similar service was held at All Souls Unitarian Universalist in New York City, my colleague Forrest Church the minister. Early in his remarks he said, "We must recall history's most ironic lesson: Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them." I've been reflecting on those words.

We are called to warfare now, to be sure. But I'm not so sure it is the warfare that the President seems to be talking about, though it may include that. The deeper warfare we are called to is spiritual. And by that you know I don't mean anything like the idiotic things said by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson after these attacks in the name of Christianity. What they said was shallow and totally unchristian; it was mean, hateful; shameful. And yet we must come to understand even that; understand it, not accept it.

As I've thought about this all, I think we are called to at least six actions. The first may seem so obvious, but let me indicate how difficult even that is. First we are called to grieve, and that means to feel all the feelings that come now, to allow ourselves all the thoughts. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross taught us that grieving is a going back and forth between acceptance and rejection, denial of our loss. She taught us that all kinds of feelings will come up, all kinds of thoughts; that we will bargain, that we will explode in anger, that we will shut down in denial - you know the list.

When we gathered this past Tuesday evening, we had a long moment just of silence. I said speak as you are moved to speak; speak what is in you. Early on a woman's voice - my back was turned so I could not see who - said with great passion, "This is so unjust ... and I want vengeance!" The word "vengeance" took me aback, and I had to remind myself that she was doing what I had asked. Then I remembered my own first reaction on seeing the second jetliner crash into the second tower. I said to myself, "This is Osama Bin Laden's work and it is time. We have to get him and his group. We have to do away with them." And I just guessed that the person behind the voice meant something deeper than we usually mean by vengeance.

Soon after a man's voice spoke - again I couldn't see who - and said or implied that vengeance was too mean, was a wrong course. I worried for a moment. I said to myself, "This too is legitimate. This is part of my own turmoil and internal debate." But the passion, though quieter, was clearly as strong as the other voice's, and I worried that what I had set up as a safe space for grieving might turn into a space of terribly angry exchange.

It didn't. But the passions of the two were not lost on each other. Since that evening both people have identified themselves to me and we have talked further. I can assure each person that it is as I thought it was. We were voicing everything that was coming up. And both people are actually closer to each other in the complexity of their thought.

We are grieving, and grief is both a clearing out of strong feelings and a coming to accept death, all kinds and levels of death, and only in doing that - hearing it all in ourselves, allowing all the feelings, venting them even, can we come to the clarity we need to move ahead.

In the clarity we get stuck in the total complexity. If it were possible to clearly, unmistakably identify all those who were part of the conspiracy, to isolate them like a surgeon isolates a cancer, and to kill them - perhaps almost all of us would find that acceptable right now. We know how impossible that is. We know that, in military-speak, there would be collateral damage. How much collateral damage would be acceptable? At what point would we begin to look like Timothy McVeigh or Osama Bin Laden? Forrest Church's words strike home to me: choose your enemies carefully, because you will become like them.

All these thoughts aside, first we must allow ourselves even these feelings. We must.

Second, there is something we must put an end to, with all the diligence of committed warfare. It is our ignorance and others' ignorance. All around us, in among us, perhaps even as friends of yours and mine, are people who call themselves Muslim, who are followers of Mohammad, who call their God Allah, who are practitioners of Islam.

Surely among those unacceptable feelings lurks one feeling and one thought that may go something like this: what is wrong with this religion that gives rise to so many terrorists who would be willing to do such a horrendous thing? Maybe it has its good points, but And maybe I should be speaking just for myself, here, a little shamefully for a liberal religious minister. I grew up Christian, I learned and claimed a love for Judaism, I know a great deal about my beloved Buddhism and a fair amount about its parent, Hinduism. I am not unfamiliar with Native, Primal religions. But I know precious little about Islam, though I have seen its beauty, been awakened by its calls to prayer from minarets, seen its people in prayer, shared space with them. I could not tell you from memory Islam's five pillars.

It is time to kill such ignorance, to become knowledgeable, in order that we can become wiser. Rightly or wrongly we pride ourselves on our intellectuality, and, "To whom much has been given, from them shall much be required." If it was not before, as of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, it has become a sin not to know more about this great world faith, Islam. Seldom do I urge a particular piece of reading from this pulpit, but this morning I urge you to begin this study, and I suggest that you begin with the book written by Karen Armstrong, called "Battle for God." Reading can be a spiritual discipline, and in this book you will learn not only about Islam but also about fundamentalism of all kinds in all faiths, not just Islam. And then, beyond the discipline of reading, we must begin the discipline of cultivating friendships with people who are Muslim.

Having said that, we are also called to do an extra part to stop all talk of "Islamic terrorists." Let me plant this thought in your minds: the group of people who did this horrendous thing stand to Islam like the Ku Klux Klan stands to Christianity. They clothe themselves in religious language, but they themselves shame the core of the religion, and they are demonic distortions of it. We, you and I, must help the media to stop this bad habit also.

Third, we must become active agents of the kind of questioning that invites people to think and go deeper about all of this. We have so many new people who have come since he got ill and then died that there are many here who don't know the name of Tom Hufford. But many of you do. Tom Hufford was a founding member of this congregation, and he left us a particular legacy. At his memorial service many of you spoke of this legacy, and I am here to suggest this morning that it is time for us to take it on as a spiritual discipline.

Tom Hufford used to walk up to a person, myself included, or walk into a group and say something like, "I've been thinking about something and it has me puzzled. I thought I'd ask you, because you're very smart people and I really respect you." And then he'd present some issue, and ask a question that was hard to give any simple answer to, though it seemed like there should be a clear answer. And sometimes an answer arose, but often all that happened was that people's consciousness was raised, and they were pricked to engage something that needed engaging.

There are many questions raised by what has happened. Although it seems now like we shall not soon forget these days, sooner than we think we shall be pulled back into our routines and into a kind of sleepwalking, a kind of day-to-day forgetting of all this poignancy. Our own departed member, Tom Hufford, taught us how to raise consciousness and keep vital things in awareness by asking good questions that had no easy answers. Now it is our turn to imitate his practice.

Fourth, as we become aware of all these feelings raised in our grief, as we become aware of the pockets of thought that we'd rather not be our thoughts, as we become aware of our own less desirable reactions, of our ignorance, of our sleepiness, of our lazy intellectuality - whatever it is, our fourth call and challenge is to become intrepidly intentional about growing and changing ourselves.

This may seem like Benjamin Franklin practicality. Franklin made a list of traits he either wanted to get rid of or traits he wanted to cultivate, and then he graded himself on his progress or regress every day. In fact, many of our forebears in this particular liberal religion also set goals for themselves and monitored their personal progress. The Mormon businessman, Stephen Covey, has a similar practice. So do any number of Catholic monks and nuns. So, for that matter, does the Dalai Lama. Like the great athletes of today, those who have made a difference have planned, scheduled, trained, practiced, and monitored their progress. We are called to no less.

If I were to ask you to write a list of what this awful moment is asking you to do, I'm sure you would come up with a short one at least. It might include some of the things I've already talked about. It might include systematically drawing closer to your loved ones. If you don't need to write a list, don't write a list. But let us take the energy of this horrendous moment and use it to make ourselves better and more effective. Merely showing up here on Sundays will not begin to make the difference in the world that our religion calls us to make.

Perhaps we begin to see that we have another enemy to contend with. It is the enemy that Mahatma Gandhi said he always had the most difficult time dealing with. It was his most recalcitrant, most stubborn enemy - Mahatma Gandhi himself. Some would say that he became the "mahatma," the great one, just because he realized this personal fact of life for all of us.

Fifth, we are called to cultivate our faith in two particular ways. I glean this from Christopher Childs, who was long the main spokesperson for Greenpeace. He took it from Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and from the Dalai Lama. It is the two-edged sword of those particular spiritual warriors. Childs says, "I accept Gandhi and the Dalai Lama ... on this point: when a perception of the potential goodness of your adversary is firmly planted in your consciousness, you are in a position to positively affect that adversary in the long term."

Such a thought may be farthest from your mind right now. I don't want to think about the potential goodness of that demonic Bin Laden or any of his henchmen. But I take to heart once again Forrest Church's caution, "Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them." And I take to heart and mind the examples of some of the greatest practical and spiritual warriors we have encountered, and of their deep social and political effectiveness. And I hold in mind our principles about the dignity and worth of every individual (the terrorists did not live this out) and about the interdependent web (in this case that every little bit of good we do, every little piece of progress we make, affects all the rest of the web).

So do not begin with Bin Laden or the terrorists. Begin with someone who is your personal enemy right now. Begin with your spouse or child right now, or a former friend become estranged, or a parent. And expand yourself from there. But know that what you do to cultivate and hold that perception of their potential goodness will have an effect in some long term. And

believe, but wisely - we have lost our innocence now, and Jesus's injunction to his followers becomes a word to us: "I send you as sheep among the wolves. Henceforth be innocent as doves and wise as serpents" - so believe, but not naively, in their potential goodness.

And the other side of that two-edged sword is this: to cultivate a belief in yourself that "I can do this." Little you. Little me. Little us, here in little Hillsboro. I can effect tremendous change. You can effect momentous differences. And we are called to. Mr. Childs cites case after case after case in his experience as a little activist with a little group called Greenpeace, and many another little activist in many another little group. It is a spiritual discipline to cultivate that belief. "Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." In doing this we join ourselves to those little, solitary New Yorkers who are carrying out the hopeless task of cleaning up the mountain of rubble and finding hope and dreams again.

Finally, and with this you may disagree, but it is on my heart and so I say it. It is my uneasy belief that we are called even in this dark moment, when everything would seem easily to justify another course, that we are called nevertheless to a deep, thorough, systematic discipline of nonviolence. I call it my uneasy belief because, if someone were to rush into this room right now and tell us that Osama Bin Laden and all his key henchmen, and all his protectors, and all the hidden remaining terrorists in this country had been found and been killed, I would probably lead you outside to dance in the streets. I'm not being rhetorical, I'm being real. But then I would go to bed tonight or tomorrow night realizing that someone else would arise, and it might even get worse. I would be sleepless at the thought of the downward spiral. As one of you said to me about this sermon, we must get rid of the root cause of what has happened, and that is something deeper than the specific people who flew the jets or set them up.

I am not talking about non-resistance. I am talking about strong resistance by non-violent means. I am not talking about pacifism, which would amount to idiot compassion. I am talking about forceful action by non-violent means. I am talking about a spirituality of resistance ... through the challenging discipline of non-violence. I am talking about the strategy that forced England to leave India, that began, even if only began, to dismantle discrimination this land, that toppled the oppressive dictator of the Phillipines, Fernando Marcos. It is not easy, nonviolence. It is tremendously difficult, takes tremendous work, but it seems to me our only long-term choice. It takes enormous discipline and practice. And it will take incredible intelligence - that very gift which the Divine has bestowed upon you - to generate non-violence into a large-scale force. And that's why I think that we in particular are called to this course.

My words have not come together easily for today. I have felt like I was standing on the rubble trying to figure out where to begin, starting, stopping, giving up, starting again. I wish they had been more eloquent, more compelling, more comforting. Both I and my words, alas, are covered in ashes and concrete powder. For all that, may they be a blessing in some good measure.