

"A Homily for These Times"

Rev. Diane Miller

Interim Minister, The First Religious Society

Carlisle, Massachusetts

September 16, 2001

Service:

### **Ingathering Music**

### **Announcements and Words of Welcome**

**Prelude:** Priere (Prayer) by Tritant Alison Reid, organist

**Lighting of the Candles:** Alessandra Forcucci

**Opening Words:** Psalm 22:1-2 (RSV)

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*

**Chalice Lighting:**

*May the light of this flame illuminate lives and strivings of the spirit. May it heal misunderstandings and strengthen love.*

**Hymn #281** *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*

(paraphrase of Psalm 90)

**Covenant:**

*Love is the doctrine of this church;*

*The quest for truth is its sacrament;*

*And service is its prayer.*

*To dwell together in peace; to seek knowledge in freedom;*

*To serve humanity in friendship;*

*To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine-*

*Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.*

### **Family Offering**

**Time to Share:** Dan Fassett, Director of Religious Education

**Candles of Community** lit by children and youth

**Reading:** from the Writings of Ann Frank

*"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."*

**Children's Recessional: Go Now in Peace**

**Unison Reading #463 "My Heart is Moved ..."**

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed.  
I have to cast my lot with those, who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world. Adrienne Rich*

**Meditation and Silence**

**FOR A TIME OF SORROW**

*I share with you the agony of your grief,  
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.  
I know I cannot enter all you feel  
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;  
I can but offer what my love does give:  
The strength of caring,  
The warmth of one who seeks to understand  
The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.  
This I do in quiet ways,  
That on your lonely path  
You may not walk alone. - Howard Thurman*

Choral Response

**Offertory Anthem: But the Lord is Mindful of His Own, F. Mendelssohn**

**Doxology**

**Blessing of the Offering**

**Hymn #200, A Mighty Fortress text, Martin Luther**

## Sermon: "A Homily for These Times," Diane Miller, Interim Minister

Today I speak to you from my heavy heart. Along with you, I feel many emotions. I feel grief and sorrow, compassion, a hard rage, and in some moments, despair. I feel resolve - a resolve to do what I can, in my sphere, to reconstitute our world, and to help with the spiritual crisis and questions which all of us face. I also feel fear, exhaustion, and dread.

I know the strange dullness of a joyless beating of my heart.

I know the supportive pulse of patriotic solidarity and determination. I feel a dread of retribution against the innocent, and remember the sage advice: *"choose your enemies carefully, for you may come to resemble them."*

I feel gratitude for the responses to tragedy - the public outpouring and messages of concern and caring. In the sphere of our liberal religious tradition, I have heard from our co-religionists in many lands: - Transylvanian Romania, England, The Czech Republic, South Africa, and Canada.

When I first looked at my personal email on Tuesday, there was a message of concern from Daisy Subaki of Indonesia. Decades ago, Daisy was an AFS student who stayed with my family in Minnesota -- the first devout Muslim I came to know well.

Rarely is it safe for the preacher to assume that everyone knows the news of the week past. In this case, everyone has learned of the tragic actions of terrorism. We are united in our common horror and compassion in a way we rarely have been in our history. Together, we have suffered this enormity as one people.

Today I speak to you from the perspective of faith, as a pastoral minister concerned about human experience and hope. I speak to you as a Unitarian Universalist minister who is reasonably well acquainted with religious history and with Islamic tradition. I have more questions than answers. This morning I am not going to give you political views, or opinions on how our nation ought to proceed. There will be time enough for our opinions. There are other places you can debate the right course for our nation, and analyze root causes of terrorism. My sermon is not the time or the place for ideology or partisan alignments.

This is a time for examining our faith, our religion, our spirituality, and our worldview. Whatever term you use, faith (the term I use most) is the foundation of our lives, our confidence, our hope, our delight in life, our trust and love, our strength to endure. Faith is the way we make sense of life and death. Faith is the way we understand the world - guided by an intentional Providence... operating under the rules of physics in a universe of chance... a stage for human beings to struggle with free will and to choose good over evil... a nihilistic absurdity... an illusory snare from which we strive to escape... a chance creation where only love and human compassion can save us... a world of reward and punishment by a parental deity.... We all have a faith of some sort under girding our lives.

For some, faith is strengthened by calamity. For others, faith has been shaken. Some souls no doubt feel their faith has collapsed and crumbled beyond rebuilding.

Here, in this sanctuary, is a place to talk about faith, and God, and our human response to the tragic events of this week. The attack has gone beyond tragedy - we have seen evil intent, deliberate inhumanity, malicious harm, and civilian carnage beyond any we have ever before known outside of war. This horror is theologically tougher than natural disasters, accidents, or even, destructive acts of war.

In these recent days we have also witnessed heroism, sacrifice for others, courage, and compassion. We have affirmed the preciousness of human life, which is honored again and again in our grief.

What are the resources of faith we can bring to this unprecedented series of events?

First, let me speak about God. I say God in the broadest sense, God as the holy, the divine, the totality of being which is greater than anything we can imagine and comprehend. God as the whole of creation, eternal being, transcendent power and immanent in our individual hearts. God as known by many names and languages of faith. The Source of all life, Spirit of Life, Gaia, Goddess, Higher Power -- terms often used by this generation of seekers.

And there is the God with whom Abraham covenanted. This is the common, shared origin story of the faith of Jews, Christians, and Moslems, the God known as Elohim, Yahweh, Allah, Jehovah.

I use the word God -- shorthand pointer toward a meaning we can hardly capture in words.

I understand God to be wounded in these terrible actions of violence and senseless destruction. I believe the religious heritage of humankind is wounded because this terrible act of terrorism was done in the name of God. In particular, Islam has suffered, for the name of Allah was blasphemed by these actions which are not, absolutely not! The meaning of the Islamic faith. God's name was taken in vain, twisted, cursed, and blasphemed every time it was used to justify these actions of evil intent.

As Unitarian Universalists, it is essential that we lift our voices to protect Moslems and Arab-Americans from reprisals by those who mistakenly believe that Islam encourages Holy War or Jihad and terrorism. There was at the outset a time when jihad meant actual war and battle. But once established, jihad became a term for the battle to live according to God's intent, to practice the five pillars of Islam. Jihad is about being a faithful, practicing, life-affirming, loving person.

In this awful instance, working on the assumption that the perpetrators considered themselves to be justified by holy blessing, Islamic faith was hijacked by extremists whose intent is not religious, no matter how much they cloak themselves in the Qur'an and proclaim the name of God. Attaching the name of God to Evil does not make the evil any more acceptable.

Unitarian Universalism proclaims pluralism in faith. We have a strong tradition of interfaith and international bridge building, having founded the first international, interfaith organization for religious freedom in human history a mere hundred years ago. Yet these interfaith groups have a regrettable absence of Islamic representation.

Within the broad scope of Islam there are a number of historic strands and traditions. There are groups with religious views comparable to our own. Indeed, mainstream Islam calls upon each believer to have a personal relationship with God, and gives wide scope to personal conscience and an emphasis on human justice.

The question so many have at this time is "How could God let this happen?"

Is evil an intentional force, an enemy doing battle with God? Or is evil the absence of good, or falling short of what is good? Do human beings create Evil? Or does it exist without our help?

God is with us in suffering, but God is not the cause of our suffering, nor is suffering a punishment.

I must speak of Compassion and Love.

Be good to one another in this time. We have pulled together as a nation in our vigil of attention and prayer, in our support of the labors of so many who are working even now, night and day; in our support of those who lost loved ones. We are all affected by these deaths, whether they were people we know, or strangers. Our grief is personal and public.

Coping is wearing thin. People are edgy. You may find yourself crying at any time or filled with a desperate desire to hug your dear ones. There will be arguments about politics, and endless "if only" regrets. We will take this in as we can, in different ways, on different timetables. There is no single correct way to grieve. The person who just doesn't feel anything beyond mesmerized fascination may break apart at some unlikely provocation.

These tragic days will weave into the fabric of life, with its joys and its sorrows. People will die of other causes; weddings will be celebrated in joy; children will be born; dinners will be cooked, homework done, and somehow, somehow, we will cope with what has happened. We will endure.

And we will respond.

Clara Barton, a 19th century Universalist, started the Red Cross in response to the suffering and devastation of the Civil War.

Look to the helpers, those who will reconstitute the world.

We are beginning life in a new era of connectedness, where there is an ethic of community and connectedness to replace the ethic of individualism. Give Blood. Donate. Respond in the coming weeks and months and years, not just in the immediate aftermath.

I must speak of Patriotism.

As I noted in the church newsletter, my elder son joined the Air Force and is finishing basic training this week. For his graduation I wrapped up a little gift, a little leather volume written by

Edward Everett Hale, a Unitarian minister. It is a patriotic little book titled *The Man Without a Country*. I read it before I sent it off, thinking it was perhaps a bit schmaltzy in its patriotic message. By the time my son reads it, fervor for the spirit of our nation will have been fully revived. The freedoms and laws he swore to uphold and protect do need our vigilant protection.

The authors of our national Independence, Adams and Jefferson, believed in the hand of Providence guiding human affairs. Despite the very risky early years of our nation, they believed that God's blessing was upon their bold venture of democracy. I do not believe, 225 years later, that the events of this week were God's plan or intention. I do believe that the best of human community is expressed in the spirit of this nation. With its many flaws, and the mistakes we have made in the past so evident with hindsight, let us pray for our leaders who must make decisions which will affect the course of history. The spirit that led the farmers named on the monument outside the doors to march to Concord on April 19th long ago is with us again, as people steel themselves for conflict. Let us not confuse love of country with hatred of others.

I have a word to say about Theology.

Belief is important. How you understand Evil, Good, punishment, salvation-these make a difference. Our own heresy is that all are saved, that salvation is not earned nor is it foreordained nor is it available to those who profess a few magic words.

Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, on the TV program "The 700 Club," claimed that certain people in the US brought this upon our nation - certain people they named with great certainty as having displeased God, who then responded by allowing or creating this horrible event. Pagans, secularists, choice-affirming feminists, gays and lesbians. Incredibly enough, they actually named these people as the cause of this terrorism - not the people who took the actions to destroy people at work on a Tuesday morning.

This may seem like a political statement from Falwell and Robertson, but actually it is a theological statement. Their theology is that God was at the hand of this event, and that it was a punishment for evil, and they believe they can name the evil-doers, the same people who don't happen to agree with them. That God can be found in the Bible - for example, The flood, a story told in which God punishes people's evil ways by wiping out Creation, except for the righteous family of Noah, who gathered the seed corn of creation two by two.

On Tuesday evening when we gathered, one person quoted a statement: it would be a good thing to draw a line and separate good people from evil people in this world. The problem is, that line runs through each and every human heart.

What we believe does matter. I don't believe that this was God's intentional act, or that this was the working of Providence. I don't believe that people are all good or all evil. I believe we have a choice, a human responsibility, and can CHOOSE to VALUE and TO FURTHER the good as we can best discern it. I don't see beliefs as good and evil, right and wrong. Beliefs can serve human ends, can comfort, can inspire, and beliefs can destroy life, and justify evil acts.

In times of tragedy it can strengthen us to turn to those who have lived through great grief. I conclude with a reading by the Rev. Howard Thurman from an earlier era:

*(from Howard Thurman's Meditations of the Heart pp 110-111)*

*During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on. This we are apt to forget. The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms; the purpose of life outlasts our purposes; the process of life cushions our processes. The mass attack of disillusion and despair, distilled out of the collapse of hope, has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral. There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility. This is the great deception. By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace. Let us not be deceived. It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing; the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed. There is no need to fear evil. There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself. We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil.*

*Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of man and to give his soul the contagion of inner disintegration. When this happens, there is nothing left, the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste. Therefore the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within. This would be to be overcome by evil. To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind - this is as always the ultimate answer to the great deception.*

**Candles of Community** lit by adults

**HYMN #159** *This is My Song* tune, Finlandia

**Benediction**

**Choral Response:** *Kindle in Our Hearts* comp. Marguerite Shaw

**Chalice Extinguishing**

**Organ Postlude:** *America*, arr. J. Linkeer

Marguerite Shaw, Minister of Music, organist

*(Tapes of the service are available from the church office)*