

**"Grant Us Patient Healing"**

**A Sermon by Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman**

**September 23, 2001**

**At the Unitarian Church of Montclair**

**Montclair, New Jersey**

We begin this morning with four related quotations:

"Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no healing for the wounds of my people?" Words from the Book of Jeremiah read.

The 16th century, European Rabbi Morawczyck said that, "The cure is hard if the sickness is old."

Our own, Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "...there is no good theory of disease which does not at once suggest a cure."

The great Moslem teacher, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi writes, "My heart is open to every form: it is a pasture for the gazelles, and the cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Kaaba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Quran. I practice the religion of love."

These four quotes will be our guideposts this morning: To search for the balm that might ease our grief; to recognize that the balm will not only be obscure, but that it will need to be a mighty powerful balm to cure the ancient sickness that has manifested itself here as terrorism; to understand, or at least seek to understand, the causes of this disease so that we might find, within our understandings, the rudiments of the cure we seek; and finally to invoke and embrace the Spirit of Love as a guiding light as we embark upon our healing quest.

In the week that has passed since we last gathered here in our sanctuary the world has continued to turn, even when we thought it might not. We've had some amount of time to adjust to our new reality, even as we have learned new aspects of it. We have begun to learn some of the consequence of our losses - we now know more names of the dead and missing; we see development of polarization. We see the growing fears, and uncivil behaviors towards our fellow citizens who are minorities. We see the beginnings of the financial destruction that will accompany the human and the property loss. And we have begun to see that, regardless of our nation's response to the horrific events of September 11th, we are in for a long siege, a sustained effort to end terrorism and to rebuild our world.

As I have, I am sure that most of you have been inundated with email, news columns, media experts and other avenues of receiving opinions, analysis and projections of what has happened and what needs to happen in response. Some of these have been helpful; some have not. What I hope to create together here this morning is a space where we might, as Emerson would say, hold the events of the day up to the light of our religious convictions to see if our values provide worth to our actions.

We come here to be sustained, to be made more whole, so that, as we act in the world, we might act in a way that better and more intentionally promotes the world of our aspirations. We come here to accomplish that very goal in good times. And we come in difficult times, such as these, with an even greater need to reaffirm our faith and our hope. Let us together form a space for that re-creation.

Through this past week I couldn't help but notice several messages in the various media - messages that I find discouraging and disruptive in our efforts to bind our wounds with a meaningful and effective balm. I have no intention of adding to the political debate. I have no illusions that those gathered in this room (or those reading these words) are of a single mind as to what ought to be the political/diplomatic/military responses to the terrorism.

My hope is that the issues I raise here will help all of us to seek to ask and answer questions like: Who are we? And on what values do we base our choices? When we can answer these questions, it means we will have searched our souls and examined our spirits. It will mean that we have found ourselves in relationship with each other and with our fellow human beings. It will mean that our findings are based in our relationship with whatever we might call that which is our largest understanding of things.

So here are the doses I find myself being asked to swallow, doses that catch in my craw because I don't believe they stand up well in the light of our religious values. I raise three for your consideration, though I've experienced even more. I wonder if they correlate to your observations of doses that will not be the cure, not be the balm for what ails the soul of our nation during this dark hour.

I feel we are being asked to heal too quickly. There is a major push to return to normal and get on with our lives. In my profession, I work a lot with grief and people in grief. I can assure you that after significant loss, there is no normal to which we can return. In loss we have to recreate life and that is a long process because it can only move forward as we let go of the life that is no longer.

If we attempt to move on too quickly, we will have failed to understand the new world in its making. We will make choices and take actions based on assumptions that are no longer grounded in our reality. We will make wrong choices that might cause further hurt to ourselves and to others. We will make expedient choices instead of healing ones. God, grant us patient healing.

I feel that we are being asked to engage in an emotionally charged militance - to assume that whatever we do, because it is we who do it, it must be right. Before you leap to the conclusion that this is indeed a political reaction, I'd like to make three quick points: 1) I'm not talking about the administration in Washington; 2) I am talking about the majority of Americans who say, bombs away, no matter the loss of innocent lives; 3) I am also talking about those who would promote peace but fail to use a peaceful means to promote their message.

Call me naïve, but I have to say that I'm somewhat heartened by the actions and the rhetoric of our national leaders. Yes, there is much more than we need of saber rattling and posturing. At the

same time, from within the highest circles of government, we are hearing voices of restraint and insight that indicate an awareness that we must place in check our arrogant, super power attitude, so that we won't alienate those other nations who also detest the actions of the terrorists. There is hope that we are beginning to recognize the need to work with and not against the rest of the world community in order to come to terms with international terrorism. Hearing these comments come out of our government gives me hope that we are moving from being a Super-Power to being a Great Power.

I trust that the saber rattling rhetoric of the administration is intended to appease the nearly 70% of our fellow citizens who want to bomb and kill anyone and everyone who stands in the path of our revenge. The desire for revenge is a natural response, one that is based in hurt and anger. These are important feelings, not to be denied but to be worked through. We live to trifles if we allow our lives to be governed by our feelings. Our lives are uplifted though, when we allow our values to inform our beliefs and our actions in ways that promote those values. It's okay to want revenge; but we don't have to take it. We can do something else.

Hating Arabs and hating Arab-Americans is not an American value. We can do better than that - and we will - by reaching out to all those who are marginalized by shallow bigotries and unfounded fears.

On the other side of this same coin are those who clamor for peace in a very similar self righteous and arrogant manner as do those who cry for vengeance. We might draw on what I fear is an unlearned lesson from the Vietnam War. I was a very active participant in the Peace Movement of that era. And I can assure you that peace - the active process of resolution through diplomacy, played a minor role in the activities of that movement which claimed its banner.

I've observed a rapidly growing polarization in our country these past days. Arrogant claims of the moral high ground and demands for capitulation from the opposition do not provide the balm we need for healing. It is not un-American to want vengeance. It is not un-American to want peace. It is an American value though, one supported by the principles of this faith community, to promote an articulation of the many differing views so that we can take the time we need to develop a common view. Allah, grant us patient healing.

Finally, I feel that we are being asked to confuse a couple of separate but related issues: our culpability in promoting a hostile global environment, vis-à-vis our national arrogance, and confusing that culpability with guilt, justifying a reason for punishment through the acts of terror.

I very much appreciated much of what President Bush had to say to the nation and the world on Thursday evening. I think he rose above himself to offer bold words of healing, hope, appreciation and strength. Still, I don't think he served himself or us very well when he asked the question, "Why do they hate us?"

The reasons he listed may well be true and I suppose they are. Freedom and democracy are despicable to tyrannical despots. But the true answers go further than that. We have practiced and continue to practice national policies and programs that benefit this country at the expense of others.

We need to look at why we are despised by those others, at our responsibility for promoting disparity. We need to discern our accountability for the world condition and we need to atone, to redeem our past ways through a more enlightened direction that promotes equity, compassion and justice for all the people of the world.

And while I believe deeply that these things are true, I believe just as deeply that there is no justification in any of this for the horrific acts of mass murder and destruction that have been inflicted upon us. There is no justification for those acts.

We are being asked to deny the one in order to defend the other. We don't have to do that. We have been greatly and wrongly injured, and we can be sure that we and others will be injured repeatedly if we do not take the necessary steps to stop those who have done this to us. And still, we have also done many things in the world that we could have done far better. There is a world of difference between terrorism and self-serving economic and political policy.

We are being asked to deny the one in order to defend the other. What we have to do is to take the time to sort them out, so that we can respond reasonably and hopefully to each. Adonai, grant us patient healing.

We do not need to accept medicines that do not help. I believe that there is a balm here in Gilead, and that we will find that balm we so desperately need, if we give ourselves the time. The sickness is an old one and the cure will be hard. But if we can only grant ourselves - and be granted - the time, I believe the theory of the disease will indeed suggest its cure. That cure will be first, love; second, love; and always love. Spirit of Love, grant us patient healing.

In an attempt to promote my own healing and to get in touch with the realities of our newly forming world, I went for a walk this past Friday night. My wife, Judy and I had been upstate New York for the funeral of a friend. When we came back, I went over to Manhattan so that I could make a hospital visit. Judy decided to keep me company on the train ride. After the visit and a quick bite of supper, we decided to walk from St. Vincent's Hospital at 12th Street and 7th Avenue down as close as we could get to area of the former World Trade Center.

It was a longer walk than we thought it was going to be, and every bit as surreal as I'd expected. The glow of the rescue lights haloed the silhouettes of both the solid and the shattered buildings. It served as a beacon drawing us closer. Our way was also candle-lit by scatterings of glass luminaria that dotted the sidewalks and the curbs of the streets. The air was filled with smoke that burned our eyes and our throats. It was filled with smells, with the scent of burnt offerings, the contents of which I did not want to consider.

What had the greatest impact on me though, was the repeated experience of wall after wall filled with posters bearing pictures of those who were missing.

It's so difficult to absorb the fullness of a death-count that now approaches 7,000. But it all becomes much clearer when faces are attached to the numbers - faces and names. Besides the images there were words printed on the fliers...birth dates, physical descriptions and pleas for any information that might lead a loved one to a reunion.

I can't help but to imagine that the people who made those posters knew the reality - the new reality-of their situations. And yet their words still cried out like prayers into the darkness of the night, "Please, please-anyone/anything out there, anything in here-please, please grant us patient healing."

The Quran says, "I sleep, but my heart awakens."

May we all be blest with sleepfulness, so that our hearts might be wakened by new understandings, by new visions of a world born perhaps in tragedy, but blessed still by the patient healing that we might be allowed.

May each of us tenaciously hold onto our dearest values; we do not have to give them up-even in the face of the greatest adversity.

And may we each learn to truly say, "I practice the religion of love."

Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, grant us that patient healing.