

**The Rev. Scott Wells Minister, The Universalist National Memorial Church
Washington, District of Columbia September 13, 2001**

My friends, children of a single God,

I give thanks to God that none of the members or constituents of the Universalist National Memorial Church died in the violence of September 11. We, at least many of us, were hurt by these dreadful acts, and will carry the pain and laments with us, perhaps for years or a lifetime. The full measure of grief has not poured. Let us help one another to recover.

The questions are without number. What language can we use? Asa, facing an overwhelming army, "cried to the Lord his God, 'O Lord, there is no difference for you between helping the mighty and the weak. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this multitude. O Lord, you are our God; let no mortal prevail against you.'" (2 Chronicles 14:11) The multitude we face are the many fears and laments we share. Yet, "perfect love casts out fear," (1 John 4:18) that is, a love which is whole and integrated. Those who have long turned to the Great Physician may now find a ready balm. To those who have not, God is near. Hear Jesus' new commandment, given on the night he was arrested and given to die: "Love one another, as I have love you."

We should remember that our national outrage and hurt is set in a long history, and many peoples have been subject to the same. The remaining, skeletal framework of the World Trade Center visually brings to mind the ancient lament of the Psalmist, when his nation was attacked: "At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes." (Psalm 74:5, NRSV) There the violation was of the Temple; here the loss is human life, perhaps numbering into the thousands, and the fruit of hard-wrought labor. This violation sets us with a company of people the living and the dead, in all nations and times with whom we share not only a common bond of life and hope, but of need and suffering. In looking for care, we find generosity and help. Quick words of comfort have reached the church office. Unitarian and Non-Subscribing Presbyterian ministers in the United Kingdom have reached out to our congregation. Vigils and observances in other countries, perhaps none so touching as those in Moscow, remind us that our world and humanity were attacked Tuesday. Let us be as eager to help when calamity touches other people. Let us also remember in prayer the large numbers of Australians, Britons, Japanese, Koreans, Mexicans, and others who died in our land as a result of the crashes. The promise of God lives with us: "The leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22:2)

Among the nations, let us give special remembrance to Afghanistan, virtually a nation of captives and refugees. I fear that association between the perpetrators and supporters of the week's violence and the acting government of Afghanistan will bring a strong retaliation whose primary victims will be innocent Afghans. In our own land, rhetoric and petty acts of violence against Arabs, Muslims, Afghans, and those thought to be these, is rolling into the threat of harm and death upon more innocents. We should not "bear false witness against our neighbor." I do not worry that we will incite violence, or propagate hatefulness. The sins of the good are more subtle, and may come through cowed silence. This anger and intimidation threatens to destroy the very outpouring of goodwill that gives some solace after the disaster. Pray for peace, forbearance, and tolerance.

In a pastoral letter attributed to the Apostle Paul, Timothy was urged to pray for those in authority. Many of us have responded by praying for the President of the United States, the Congress, the Mayor of the District of Columbia, the Governors of Maryland and Virginia, and others. Yet in the letter, those in authority would have been hostile forces. Like Jesus, we should not only pray for those with great responsibilities, but also enemies. We should remember those who committed the violence in prayer, too. Why must this be? If we believe much of what has been said of the hijackers and their presumed organizers, we would believe a lie. These too were and are human beings, and not otherwise. It is hard to comprehend the forces or reasons that would lead someone to mass murder by suicide, and I pray we never know them. Pray that those who remain stop. We cannot say they were driven by joy, love, or peace, and if we were deprived of these, how would we respond and with what would replace them. "There but for the grace of God go I." This violence will test our faith: we should not surrender it in a fit of passion, however understandable.

Lastly, let us defend those who are least able to defend themselves: the young. Our faith and resolve, and constant affirmation of love and protection, are their strength now. The moment may pass, but the images remain. The young will need us now, and in months and years to come. Those old enough to know the events will mark their lives by it. In caring for our own needs, let us stand vigilant for these little one.

Now, keep the faith, and let perfect love continue. We will be measured, first in the eyes of those around us, and then by our own souls in the long moments of reflection to come, and at last by God, who is closer than anything or any being to our minds and spirit.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4: 5). Peace be with you all.

(The Rev.) Scott Wells