

"The Burden of Why"

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September 16, 2001

A former parishioner is found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in the van of a man who is not her husband. A sixteen-year-old boy, passenger in a speeding car, is killed in an accident. A four-year-old child is accidentally burned to death playing near his family's wood stove. A nineteen-year-old young man asphyxiates himself in the family garage. A twenty-two-year-old woman dies of an allergic reaction on the streets of San Francisco. A wonderful and kind person who has lived a good life suffers an agonizing death.

Why? Why do such things happen in a supposedly good world, with a supposedly good God?

This week we have all been confronted by the burden of why. Why did all of these innocent people have to die? Why would anyone do such a thing? Why would a man destroy his own life? Why didn't someone do something to prevent it? Why is there such evil in the world? Why did God allow this to happen?

I have no answers to these questions. I might as well say that at the outset. I am, at turns, fearful, sorrowful, angry, tired, and confused. I cannot find the words. There are no words.

Fortunately, I do not believe in a God who would cause or allow such things to happen. I do not believe in a God who kills innocent people, for whatever exalted reason, or who demands that we kill. But I am as afflicted by the burden of why as anyone. My role as a minister does not entitle me to special information about why bad things happen. I do not know. I do not have the answer. I am as mystified and confounded and shocked by the events of this week as you are.

Over the years, I have learned to be humble in the face of this mystery. I have had to be. I have been forced to confront my ignorance over and over and over again. As one of the readings I use in memorial services puts it, "All of life is contained in a mended cup of meaning. It is a cup which is broken and mended, broken and mended, over and over again." Today, we are once again forced to do the hard work of mending the broken cup of life. It is not easy to do. From this day forward, it will always remain cracked, imperfect, no matter how well we manage to cobble it together again.

There is something terrible about this cup. It forever reminds us of our carelessness, our stupidity, our anger, our failure, our helplessness, our callousness, our ignorance, our inability to put the pieces back together in precisely the same way as they were before, the way that we wish it could be. The cup is broken. It can be mended, but it will never be the same again.

There is something beautiful and precious about this cup and its imperfection. It is filled with our humanity. It is filled with our pain and our sorrow, but it is also filled with our joy and our love. It shows us that we have survived. We may be battered and bruised and scarred, but we are still here! We have not given up, yet. We are not defeated. We are down, but not out.

Human beings are meaning-makers. We are repairers of the broken cup and menders of the rendered fabric. Already, there is meaning emerging from the senseless acts of violence we have experienced this week. Selfless acts of heroism and sacrifice. Generosity. People coming together to help one another, even to help the strangers among us. People laying down their lives for another. Reaffirmation of the preciousness of life and of the need to say our love. Courage in the face of terrible, unspeakable loss. A renewed sense of the importance of community. Unity and solidarity.

Other forces are at work as well, and we must resist them. Anger. Hatred. Irrational prejudice. Despair. The desire for blind revenge. The stereotyping of innocent people. Stupidity. Stupidity.

The horrible acts we have witnessed this week are not religious acts. They are not the acts of a particular religion or ethnic group. They are the acts of fanatics. As the words of masters Falwell and Robertson this week are evidence, we know that we do not have to go beyond the borders of our own country and our own prevailing religious culture to find fanatics. It is fanaticism that is the great enemy of true religion. Islam, no more than Christianity or Buddhism or Hinduism, does not teach murder and mayhem. Arabs, Afghanis, and Palestinians do not hold a patent on hate and evil. Right here in our own beloved country, we have too often allowed fanaticism to flourish, especially when it is financially or politically expedient to do so. It is fanaticism that we need to fear and to fight, and no religion or nationality is immune to its awful consequences.

All of the great religious traditions teach the preciousness of life. All of them have a version of the golden rule. All of them counsel us to treat with kindness and generosity the stranger who is among us. None of them advocates suicide. Only in ancient and obsolete texts is the murder of innocents justified. No one in his right mind believes any longer in "an eye for an eye." Only the fanatic believes that she has the absolute truth. Only the fanatic believes that it is right to kill innocent people. Only a fanatic is willing to take his own life in the process.

We all have a responsibility to stand up to fanaticism. We all share some responsibility for its existence. Goodness can only triumph by our tireless efforts. God may be a God of Love, but God obviously cannot prevent events such as we have witnessed this week. God does not spare the good, the honorable, the kind, the generous, the loving, the beautiful, the young, or the innocent. We are God's eyes and ears and hands in this world. We are the ones who must make a difference, we are the ones who must do the work of healing, we are the ones who must stand up to the fanatics, we are the ones who must keep love alive in the world. God is not going to do it for us. It is up to us.

It really does matter what we believe. It really does matter that we promote loving kindness, compassion, empathy for the suffering of others, and generosity. It is not a matter of indifference, because evil flourishes in the midst of our indifference. It is not a matter of convenience only, but of necessity. It is not a matter of "only when I feel like it." Oh, yes, I get weary, too. I would rather be doing something else and thinking about something else and speaking about something else. But a week like the one we have just experienced shows me that I really don't have any choice. To stand idly by is to acquiesce in evil.

At times like this, we realize how much we need one another. We realize how little our differences really matter. We realize that we are all in this together, that we must stand together, support one another, and care for one another. It does make a difference. The consequences of not doing so are evident all around us.

Over the years, as I have tried to comfort families in the midst of tragedy and loss, I have come to realize that there is really not very much that I can do. Unlike the heroes of the Bible, I cannot raise the dead. The words are never adequate and are sometimes wrong. All I can really do is be there and be honest. No, I don't know why this happened. All I know is that it is terrible, it is not fair, it makes no sense, it was not deserved, it cannot be reversed. It's not because of anything you did, or because you were bad. There's really nothing you could have done. It's not your fault. It could happen to anyone. How does one fill the void of so great a loss?

The question is, as always, what shall we do about it? I am not naive about the need to eliminate evil. There are things worth dying for. One of my greatest heroes is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran minister who, during World War II, came to conclusion that it was OK to kill Adolf Hitler, and died as a result of participating in a conspiracy trying to do so. However, recent history leaves me skeptical. Let us withhold our judgement and our vengeance until we are certain that we know all the facts. Let us concentrate on the log that is in our own eye, rather than the speck that is in another's. Let us hold on to one another for dear life, for life is precious, and it is perishable, and none of us knows the day or hour. Let us speak the truth with love in the face of hate and violence.

During the gulf war in 1991, I confess that I had strong feelings of patriotism. I love my country in spite of its flaws. Do you remember those words of the second verse of "America the Beautiful"? ". . . God mend thine every flaw." I was aggravated by what I perceived as a knee-jerk resistance to the American use of force. I was angry at the hypocrisy of friends and colleagues who shouted "no war for oil" but who continue to live the good life of a petroleum-based economy.

But now I am not so sure. War usually accomplishes little or nothing; certainly, this was true of the Gulf War . It may even have contributed to the events of this week. Violence breeds more violence. If violence is used it must be used with great trepidation and discrimination and with a terrible, fearful regret. It must, so far as possible, be exercised based on just war criteria. War may not be always wrong, but it is most of the time. I hope that we will find a better way to solve our problems, so that we can finally get to the root of what causes the kind of fanaticism that murders all sense of the value of life, even of one's own. What is it that causes such desperation and despair and carelessness and hate?

What does one say to a teenager whose mother has died as the result of an adulterous liaison? What does one say to a mother when she cries, "He was only sixteen!" What does one say to the parent who only stepped out of the house for a moment? How can one explain to a young man's siblings, why their beloved brother has taken his own life? How, in the middle of a great modern city, within minutes of some of the most sophisticated medical institutions in the world, can a young woman die alone on the street of an allergy attack? Why does a person whose life was

marked by love and kindness suffer the agonies of the damned at the end? Why did it have to happen? Why did these men take thousands of innocent lives along with their own? Why?

The burden of why must be borne by each of us. Our religion demands that we seek an answer, even though we may never find an adequate one. Our religion demands that we do so in the spirit of truth-seeking. It demands that we exercise reason and that we have justice as our goal. Our religion demands that we demean no one's inherent worth and dignity. It demands that force be a last resort, and that peace everlasting is the goal.

For what does the Lord require of us, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God? Micah's great words echo down the ages. If only we could follow his admonition. This week I have been comforted by the words of the ancient Psalmist. Though I do not believe in a traditional God, I do believe in a spirit of goodness and peace and hope. I do believe that this spirit is alive in the world and in human beings and especially pervasive in community, and that it will ultimately triumph over the evil that we do. It is this spirit that I mean when I say God:

God is our refuge and our strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Such words of comfort do not remove the burden of why, but they do help to lighten its load, just as the opportunity to be together in this community of faith helps to lessen my loneliness and isolation, not just in times of tragedy, but in times of joy and in ordinary times as well. May you, too, find some comfort in this place, and may it ease the burden of why, if only for a time. God bless you all.

Amen.