

## Homily

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County, PA

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*I ask you to pray as if you really believed prayer can change events. I know prayer can change us, and I suspect it may even change the way we behave-and, thus, events.*

We will not be the same again as a country. It's not so much that we "lost our innocence," as one person said to me this week, but that we know the world's suffering firsthand. We have seen and felt that we are not safe from those who want to inflict suffering upon us. And we don't want to consider why some fear and hate us so deeply.

And so we pause this morning on the day before the high and holy days of Judaism, a time which expresses one great theme: "God remembers." If we believe with Martin Luther King, Jr. that the moral arm of the universe is long, but "it bends toward justice," I pray that we will leave retribution up to that God.

Our church was open two days this week so that people could come in and light a candle or spend time in prayer and mediation. Our guests came in quietly and often alone. Sometimes they lit a candle. One woman told me about her fiancée on the eightieth floor of one of the buildings hit by the plane. I did not want to tell her I thought he had not survived, so we lit a candle together. Another woman was visiting from New York City. She lit a candle and gave the sign of the cross. I told her "Vaya con Dios." One young woman just sat and cried. And all I could do was cry with her. I could find no words. And so they came during the day. Most just sat quietly. They gathered strength from being here. Ours was truly a sanctuary.

Why do bad things happen? Most happen because of our hate and fear. The more we hate and fear, the more it grows in us and attracts more sinister energy.

Someone here emailed me this week how hard it was to believe in one of our most cherished principles, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Does that include the terrorists? Yes, however hard it may be, we have to extend to them what they would not extend to us- their basic humanity.

Intellectually and theologically, the problem of evil has always created difficulties for me, either justifying the goodness of humanity or the love of God. Elie Wiesel, the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize who grew up in Unitarian Transylvania, was taken as a boy to a concentration camp where he had to watch his family die. Once a devout young Jewish student, he stopped believing in God. Watching a child hang, Wiesel heard an old man behind him asking: "Where is God now?" And he writes: "I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? He is here on this gallows.'"

There are no easy answers for human suffering. We should not be like the comforters of Job who told him God was in heaven and all was right on earth-which made him feel only worse. Far

better an honest atheist who offers human compassion than a born again true believer who tells us not to grieve. Good grief is necessary for healing.

Yet, yet.....I must live, and so must you. And herein is the only response to wanton killing and terror that makes sense to me. How do you want to live? Do you want to sow hate and death and destruction and kill others, whether in the name of God or the nation-state? Do you want to enter heaven with the blood of innocents on your hands? Or would you rather live as if every human being had worth and dignity, as if life were really worth something-- even though history teaches us that life can become quite cheap in the death camps of Europe or the rice paddies of Vietnam or the back streets of drugs and crime in any city?

I have no doubt in my mind what our faith teaches us. It teaches us that every creature has worth, that the arm of moral universe is long but it bends toward justice, that love is stronger than all the bombs and star wars defense systems we can muster. It teaches us also the law of reciprocity and attraction-Sow love and it will come back to you; sow hate and it will fester and grow and come back as well.

And if you must ask where God is in all this or why God did not stop the planes from colliding into the buildings of New York, then let me offer a different answer: If you want to see the only kind of God I can respect, look for God among the health care professionals or firemen or police who rushed to the scene to help people they didn't even know.

Every bone in my body wants to get back at whomever caused such wanton destruction. Every fiber wants to main and destroy.

But I also remember hearing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talk after a few non-violent protestors had been beat over the heads, pleading that if the marchers returned the violence with more, it would only escalate. There was almost a divine power in restraining the desire to retaliate against force with force. And I do understand the need to find some way to let those who planned and perpetuated this horror pay-but not if that means killing thousands or millions of others who are just as innocent of their crimes as the people who worked in the buildings in New York City. If it is always to be an eye for an eye, then soon everyone will be blind or dead.

I heard a rabbi say that one of his colleagues said that the lesson Americans are learning is that they, too, are "Israelites." That is true. We have learned that terrorism is not something that happens just in Jerusalem. But I want to add this: That we are learning that we, too, are Palestinians. They have seen wives and sons and daughters destroyed in bombings. They, like the Jewish people, have suffered. Maybe if enough of us understand our common humanity and forget the religions that divide us, we can yet save our planet.

One thing we can do today is live what we say we believe and let others know: Every human life has dignity. We are all God's chosen people. Violence is not an answer to injustice. Mother Jones said it best: "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living."

And so this Sunday and the weeks thereafter, I ask you to "fight like hell for the living." Pay more attention that you usually do to those you love. Spend more time listening to your children.

Volunteer to help at our food pantry or donate funds or blood to the American Red Cross (which after all was started by a Universalist, Clara Barton). If you hear someone talking about Moslems or Jews in a disparaging way, don't be silent. Let them know you feel hurt. And remember the best part of America-that we are still a republic and hold these truths to be self-evident: That all people are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights-life, liberty, and the pursuit of justice. Hang the American flag out, this time celebrating our diversity and love of freedom and respect for revolutionary fervor that seeks to transform love into justice. But I ask you to do something else. I ask you to pray as if you really believed prayer can change events. I know prayer can change us, and I suspect it may even change the way we behave-and, thus, events.

Just as people came into this sanctuary this week to sit quietly and pray, I ask you today to do the same, as you hear the prayers of the world's faith traditions.

*The Buddhist Litany for Peace:* Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion-toward ourselves and toward all living beings. Let us pray that all living beings realize that they are brothers and sisters of all, nourished from the same source of life. Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to others.

*St Francis:* Grant that we may seek not so much to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, and it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

*Bahai* Oh thou kind Lord, thou has created humanity from the same original parents. Thou hast intended that all belong to the same household. In thy holy presence they are thy servants and all humankind are sheltered beneath thy tabernacle.

*Quaker, John Woolman:* Gracious Creator, who provides for all creatures, and whose tender mercies are over all creation, help us to lessen the distress of the afflicted and increase happiness so that the channel of Universal Love becomes the business of our lives."

*Sioux Prayer, adapted from Yellow Lark, O Great Spirit...*make my hands respect the things you have made, my ears sharp to hear your voice. I seek strength not to be superior to my brothers and sisters, but to be able to respect all creatures as one with me in You.

*Muslim Prayer:* Save us, Compassionate Lord, from our folly by your wisdom; from our arrogance by your forgiving love; from our greed by your infinite bounty, and from our insecurity by Your healing love.

*Unitarian Prayer from India:* God, root and source of body and soul, we ask for boldness in confronting evil. O father and mother of humankind, may we redeem our failings by the good work that we do.

*Starhawk:* Earth mother, star mother, you who are called by a thousand names, may all remember we are cells in your body and dance together.

*From the Hindu Scriptures:* Let the cosmic powers be peaceful; let Brahma be peaceful; let there be undiluted and fulfilling peace.

*Today's Prayer:* O Abiding One who sees us for who we are and knows us as a mother knows a child, we pray for ourselves this day. Rescue us from our need to show power with force. Create in us a new spirit of compassion. Teach us the strength of love that can suffer and the abiding presence of Your holy love, even in the midst of death. Teach us to care for one another and to feel in our hearts that we are children of a single Parent who has given us life and time and earth and spirit and heart. And, in the midst of suffering, keep us from evil and deliver us from violence. Amen. Now in this sanctuary and in the inner sanctuary of your soul, pray for those who died, pray for those who are living, and pray that you may be a instrument of peace in a world torn by strife.