

9/11 Fifteen Years Later: Forgiveness, Healing, and Hope

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on September 11, 2016]

I

“Looking back, I realize it was the beautiful day that killed us.”

Those were the words of Richard Picciotto, a New York City fire battalion commander.

His book, *Last Man Down*, told the story of his four hours trapped in the rubble of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

Picciotto believes that if it had been gray or foggy or overcast on September 11, 2001, there was no way the terrorists could have flown those airplanes.

But it was not gray or foggy or overcast.

Fifteen years later you still remember what kind of day it was—
all of us do—
a beautiful late-summer day (like today!).

All up and down the East Coast and throughout the Midwest it was the same:
calm winds,
blue skies,
not a cloud in sight.

Boston...

New York City...

Washington, D.C....

Shanksville, Pennsylvania...

Portland, Indiana...

all were enjoying an absolutely gorgeous, late-summer day.

How well we remember: the beauty of the day and the horror of the event.

II

Fifteen years later the question still reverberates in the American psyche:

why did Al-Qaeda attack America?

Even with the smaller-scale terrorist attacks of recent years at Fort Hood, Texas, the Boston Marathon, the San Bernardino health department Christmas party, the Orlando night club, the events of 9/11 are still fresh in our memories.

No doubt all of us over the age of 23 or 24 clearly recall where we were, what we were doing, when we heard the news that planes had crashed into the Twin Towers.

We recall our feelings of shock and horror as we witnessed the Towers collapsing into heaps of rubble...

the gaping burning hole in the side of the Pentagon...

the debris of Flight 93 scattered across the field in Shanksville, PA.

It is true that the 19 hijackers were partly motivated by their hatred of western values—

secular democracy that separates church and state,

religious pluralism,

freedom of speech,

the privacy of the individual,

and toleration of dissent.

When the members of Al Qaeda attacked on 9/11, many Americans wondered,

“Why do they hate us so much?”

The answer we frequently heard was they hate us for our “freedoms.”

And I think that’s true, but only to a point.

If we stop there, we fail to understand the full complexity of why 9/11 happened.

Fundamentalist extremists of any religion have a tendency to view the world in black-and-white terms with no room for middle ground or ambiguity.

Nations are "either for us or against us," as President George W. Bush famously said.

On one side there is an "axis of evil" that wills us harm;
on the other side there are enlightened people who champion
the true, the good, and the just.

Those who know me know I disagree vehemently with the tenets of
fundamentalism, no matter what the religion.

Seldom is this kind of absolutist, either/or thinking helpful.

All too often it leads to acts of violence carried out in the name of religion.

One thing we can say clearly is that the vast majority of Muslims in this world are
peace-loving persons who aspire to the same democratic freedoms we enjoy in
their own countries.

There are millions of Muslims all over the world working against the terrorist
tactics of groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, Boko Haram, and others.

Other people have pointed to American foreign policy, especially in the Middle
East.

A 1998 *fatwa* issued by Osama bin Laden objected not to our values but to three
specific "crimes and sins"—

our support for the United Nations sanctions against Iraq (1990–2003),

our support of Israel over the aspirations of the Palestinians for their own
state,

and the presence of our military bases in sacred Muslim lands.

A candid assessment of the impact of American foreign policy does not mean one
has jumped on the "blame America first" bandwagon.

It means the honest recognition that the US has for the last seventy years,
and especially the last 25 years since the fall of the Soviet Union,
possessed overwhelming military and economic power,
that we have exercised that power in ways that have benefited us—

what any nation would do—
but not always to the benefit of citizens of other nations.

This reality is bound to sow seeds of resentment and bitterness.

So while these are some of the explanations for what happened on 9/11,
please note: **they are not valid excuses.**

There is no excuse for the type of global terrorism practiced by groups like ISIS
and Al Qaeda.

III

How should we as Christians respond to the event of 9/11?

Fifteen years seems like a long time, but it is still not long enough to fully
understand the scope and scale of this tragedy that killed almost 3000 persons of
every religion, race, and culture and from over 90 nations.

One thing 9/11 represented for all Americans is the awareness of our own
vulnerability.

Many nations have experienced terrorist attacks over the years—
most European nations have had to deal with terrorism for decades.

But we Americans had operated on the assumption that we were safe from this
kind of thing—that we were protected by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Now we know that is no longer true and, as a result, we are much more vigilant
and much better prepared to prevent such attacks than we were on 9/11/01.

It behooves us, therefore, to consider what the Christian response to such an event
should be.

First, I would like to tell you what it should not be.

When politicians say that we should keep Muslims from coming to our country,
and refuse to resettle refugees from Syria and other places of conflict,
that is playing right into the hands of ISIS.

ISIS has stated that its goal is to form a world-wide caliphate,

with all Muslims under its control.

If the United States and other western nations close their doors to the victims of civil war and terror, such people will have nowhere else to turn but to the caliphate, which will inevitably lead to more persons willing to be terrorists.

Furthermore, the Islamophobia that afflicts certain parts of our culture diminishes all of us and weakens our nation.

Every time there is a terror incident, violence against American Muslims spikes.

Between March 2015 and March 2016, 12 American Muslims were murdered in bias-motivated attacks.

Several weeks ago in New York City an imam and his associate were shot dead in broad daylight.

Thursday in New York City two Muslim mothers who were pushing their babies in strollers were attacked by a woman who hit them in the face, tried to tear off their hijabs, knocked over one of the strollers, and cursed at them to “get the f... out of America.”

Islamophobia is an issue for anyone who cares about the United States and the ideals that undergird it,
especially freedom of religion.

It shouldn't have to be repeated, but the fact is terrorist groups represent a miniscule fraction of Muslims worldwide, who are, after all, both the primary victims and primary opponents of ISIS and al-Qaida.

Terrorists speak for Muslims no more than the Ku Klux Klan speaks for Christians.

IV

Another crucial point: **the 9/11 attacks should not be viewed as God's judgment on America's moral failings.**

On Pat Robertson's show “The 700 Club” two days after 9/11, the late Jerry Falwell infamously construed the 9/11 attacks as divine punishment for the wickedness of pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the ACLU, and People for the American Way.

“I point the finger in their face,” he said, “and say, ‘you helped this happen.’”

Pat Robertson, nodding in agreement, said, “Well, I totally concur.”

In their view, America's policies aren't wrong because they're politically imprudent as a matter of practice.

Rather, they are morally wrong as a matter of principle because they violate God's standards (or rather, there interpretation of those standards).

The remarks of Falwell and Robertson were reckless and hateful.

Of all people, Christians ought to be uncomfortable with linking divine judgment and national disaster,
 whether for the U.S. or any other nation.

It's one thing to affirm that God acts in the history of nations.

It's quite another to claim to know exactly how, when, where, or why.

And yet, having said that, no less than Abraham Lincoln once described the Civil War as God's judgment on America for the evil of slavery.

Christians face particular difficulties in deconstructing the 9/11 attacks.

The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world are not the same.

Personal spiritual truths in the Bible do not translate into national public policies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this dilemma during the Nazi horrors when, in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, he wrote...

"German Christians faced a terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization."

The good news of the Gospel and the glory of a nation often collide,
 for if Jesus is Lord, then all the pharaohs and Caesars of the world are not.

Is America somehow exceptional in the world? Yes and no.

In terms of economic, political, military, scientific and cultural influence,
America is unrivaled.

In that sense, it's accurate to say that America is "exceptional," although there's no reason to think this will last forever, or that all our influence is necessarily for good.

Our Christian identity is ultimately spiritual, not political or national.

As St. Paul writes in Philippians 3:20,

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

From a Christian point of view, America is no more or less "exceptional" in God's eyes than Iceland or India or Eretria.

Historian Rebecca Lyman observes that the early church developed in the context of Greek, Roman, and Jewish "exceptionalisms," and has ever since been tempted to mimic rather than challenge them.

It's natural and normal to love and take pride in one's country.

But when it comes to geography, culture, nation, and ethnicity,
Christians are egalitarians rather than exceptionalists,
and we reject any and all forms of narcissistic nationalism.

For us there is no geographic center of the world,
only a constellation of points equidistant from the heart of God.

Proclaiming that God lavishly loves the entire world,
each person and every place,
the gospel does not privilege any country as exceptional.

*“The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and they that dwell therein.”* (Psalm 24:1, KJV)

An Iranian Muslim is no further from God's love than an American Christian.

A Honduran Pentecostal is no closer to God's love than an Oxford atheist.

This Christian egalitarianism subverts all geo-political nationalisms.

V

This brings us to our final and most problematic question:

Should Christians forgive the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks?

When great harm has been done...

when evil has been perpetrated on the grand scale that we saw on 9/11...
is forgiveness ever possible,
or even desirable?

That question haunted Holocaust survivor Eva Kor, whose remarkable story is told in the 2006 documentary film *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*.

Eva and her twin sister Miriam spent ten months in Auschwitz, where Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi "Angel of Death," carried out horrific experiments on the prisoners.

Along with many other twins, Eva and Miriam were subjected to Dr. Mengele's "medical" experiments.

After liberation by the Soviets when she was ten years old, and then ten years in Israel, Eva relocated to Terre Haute, Indiana in 1960 and raised her family.

Eva returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, and on that occasion she did the unthinkable.

She read aloud her personal "official declaration of amnesty" to Mengele and the Nazis.

To be liberated from the Nazis was not enough, she said;
she needed to be released from the pain of the past.

To extend forgiveness without any prerequisites required of the perpetrators, said Eva, was an "act of self-healing."

"Forgive your worst enemy," she says. "It will heal your soul and set you free."

Through the act of forgiveness, Eva said that she experienced "the feeling of complete freedom from pain."

Many Jews and fellow Holocaust survivors were outraged by her act,
thus demonstrating that forgiveness is sometimes a risky thing to do.

VI

In our scripture readings today, both Jesus and Joseph commend the healing power of forgiveness.

Joseph believed that God had a larger providential purpose for Israel beyond the private wrongs he had suffered at the hands of his brothers:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20-21).

At least four times he reassures his nervous brothers, "it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God" (Genesis 45:5, 7, 8, 9).

In today's gospel lesson, Peter asks Jesus,

"How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Forgiving someone seven times was very generous, according to the Jewish rabbis.

But Jesus ups the ante and expands the arithmetic of forgiveness.

He instructs his followers to forgive not merely seven times,
but seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven.

Jesus then tells an outlandish parable about an "unmerciful servant" who received forgiveness for his own enormous debt,

but then instead of extending forgiveness for a tiny debt that he was owed,
had the debtor thrown into jail.

In Jesus' kingdom, forgiveness is beyond calculation or comprehension.

Jesus also links receiving forgiveness to our willingness to extend forgiveness.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart."

In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to...

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Our receiving forgiveness for ourselves is inextricably linked with our willingness to extend it to others.

Forgiveness of this magnitude is rooted in the character of God as a fundamentally forgiving God.

St. Paul writes, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"* (Ephesians 4:32).

Frederic Luskin, co-founder of Stanford University's Forgiveness Project, says that forgiveness "reduces anger, hurt, depression and stress and leads to greater feelings of optimism, hope, compassion and self-confidence."

Luskin has conducted numerous workshops and research projects on forgiveness.

He's worked with a variety of people in corporate, medical, legal and religious settings.

In his book *Forgive for Good*, Luskin elucidates what Eva Kor experienced and what Joseph and Jesus taught:

that in forgiving we become "heroes instead of victims in the stories we tell."

In a post 9/11 world, the real heroes are those who humbly and quietly extend forgiveness, healing, and hope to those who are wounded, alienated, and broken.

For the one who first starts to forgive will, in the end, be victorious.

VII

After 9/11, Christian author Philip Yancey was asked where God is when it hurts.

He had written a book with that very title, so he thought for a moment and said,

“I guess the answer to that question is another question. Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job — binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry — I don’t think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They’ll know where God is: in the presence of his people on earth.”

Sisters and brothers, this is our call:

to bind up wounds,
to comfort the grieving,
to feed the hungry,
and to work for reconciliation in God’s world.

We can do this as individuals,

as families,
as a community of faith,
and as a nation...

if we find our forgiveness, healing and hope in God.

Then we will see God’s hand at work even in the most horrifying of human events.

And we can raise our voices to sing not just “God Bless America”—
which many will be singing today, especially at baseball parks—
but go on to write a second verse:

*God bless the world we love,
Stranger and friend,
Go before us, restore us
With a hope that despair cannot end.
Ev’ry people, ev’ry nation,
Mighty ocean, heaven’s dome.
God bless the world we love
Our fragile home.*

*God bless the world You love,
Our fragile home.*

Amen.

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