

Nine Years Later

Mathew 6:9-15

Galatians 5:16-26

Those of you who have been around a while know that I will sometimes take a break from the lectionary for a month or two to do a short series or to take a look at some of the scripture that never appears in the lectionary, but as a general rule I don't stray from it for national observances or to note anniversaries of things.

But as the writer of Ecclesiastes said, there is a time for everything, and on the weekend of the 9th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, I think that it is time to break from business as usual and comment, not on the attacks themselves, but on what has become of us as a nation since then.

There are two reasons that prompt this. The first is the proposed building of an Islamic community center and mosque in lower Manhattan, two city blocks away from where the World Trade Center stood, and more importantly, the immediate and vitriolic response it has provoked. Muslim worshippers around the country have been threatened. Mosques and Islamic community centers have been vandalized, including right here in Tennessee. And of course, there is the little church in Florida that has made headlines for its plan to burn copies of the Qur'an on the anniversary of 9/11.

The other reason to address the issue is the recent flooding in Pakistan and the world's failure to adequately come to the aid of the millions of Pakistanis who are now homeless. After the earthquake in Haiti charity flowed out of our hearts and pocketbooks, but Pakistan has been a different story. Compassion and generosity have been in short supply because of the stories we hear about government corruption, and our anger and mistrust of the Taliban. We have even questioned whether or not the Pakistanis deserve our help. The world has jumped to put Haiti back on its feet. Pakistan's refugees look like they will be struggling for a long time.

Nine years ago we were a country in shock. We were a country in grief. Nothing so devastating had ever happened on our soil and we couldn't begin to grasp the horror of those images and the lives lost. In the days that followed we gathered as churches to be consoled by the promise that God is stronger than any force of evil, and has the power to bring good out of terror and tragedy. We gathered in interfaith communities side by side with Jews and Muslims and pledged that we would not let the hatred and violence of few get the better of us.

A year and a half later, we gathered again when we invaded Iraq, and we prayed for peace and justice, for wisdom for our leaders. We prayed for healing and for reconciliation. On the eve of a brand new war, we even prayed for our enemies.

And then we moved on. Life slowly got back to normal, a new kind of normal, even while we were at war with Iraq and Afghanistan. But even as we got on with our lives, and resigned ourselves to padding barefoot through airport security with our three ounce bottles of shampoo and toothpaste, an undercurrent of fear and anger began growing. Bitterness and suspicion and prejudice began to show and voice itself. We heard that Muslims were trying to take over the

world, or more modestly, trying to destroy our government and our way of life, our freedom, our religion. We heard the word 'evil' in the same sentence as "Islam," or "Muslim." In nine years time something shifted in our internal culture. We went from being a victim to being an angry mob.

So how do we move forward? How do we regain that faithful footing we had nine years ago, seven years ago when we looked to God for help and stood arm in arm with our neighbor? There are a number of ways we could go about it.

One way would be to remind ourselves that the ones who have committed the acts of violence are extremists. They do not represent all Muslims, nor do they represent the core of the Islamic faith any more than the Christian extremists who bomb abortion clinics or burn the Qur'an represent all Christians, or more importantly, us. Anytime we use the word 'they' to lump people together we are walking on thin ice. We need to remember that 'they' worship the same God we do, the God of Abraham. We need to remember that some of 'them' are our neighbors, they live down the street from us, and take care of us when we are sick, and go to school with us, and volunteer alongside us in making the world a better place.

We could also point out that, if we feel like 'they' have misjudged us, we have been equally guilty of misjudging Muslims, what they believe, and how they live their lives; what their religion requires of them. Have you picked up the Qur'an? Those people who say it is subversive are right. It teaches that there is only one God, the God of Abraham, and that we shouldn't make any other idols or gods for ourselves. It is insistent that all people are equal, rich, poor, servant and master alike. It teaches that all people should be treated fairly and justly.

Are there hints of violence in it? Passages that call for the blood of God's enemies? I haven't run into them yet I hear they are in there. But take a look at our own scriptures. In Psalm 141 there is a verse that we've never gotten around to setting to music, the psalmist's delight at the thought of someone smashing his enemies' babies' heads against the rocks. In Joshua the Israelites are instructed by God to go into the Promised Land, land that is already occupied, and kill everything – man, woman and child – and take the cities for their own. Our scripture has plenty of its own talk of the vengeance and judgment that will be visited on those who oppose God and God's people.

The other thing we could do is remind ourselves of our own Christian history, that it has not been something to be particularly proud of. There was the bloody zeal of the Crusades, when we combined pilgrimage with efforts to exterminate the infidels. There was the Inquisition. And what about the persecution of the Anabaptists during the Reformation? We were so obliging of their insistence on adult baptism by immersion that we drown them in the river. There's Colonialism, Imperialism, the scriptural justification of slavery. I could go on, but you get the idea. All kinds of violence and oppression carried out in the name of God, and under the guise of evangelism.

We could consider all those things as we try to figure out what is the right and proper response to the events in the world around us, and the way we should think about Muslims, whether radical or moderate, but in the end all those things we listed are just distractions. When it gets right

down to it, what's important isn't what they believe or that only a small percentage of 'them' are bad apples, or even our own shameful history. What's important, the only thing that is important, is what Jesus taught us and left us here to do.

When we were little and my friends and I would get mad at each other one of us would invariably say, "my dad can beat up your dad." It was the worst threat and insult we could think of. And the other one of us would then have to stand up for her poor dad – "Nuh uh. My dad can beat up your dad." God doesn't need us to defend his good name. When Jesus left it wasn't with instructions that we should fight anyone who besmirches God or doesn't think Jesus was anything more than a good man or a prophet. In fact, the disciples once asked Jesus if he wanted them to call fire down on a town that was hostile to him, and he rebuked them instead. Shake the dust off your feet and move on, was all he ever said. Let God deal with them in God's own way and time. The only harsh words Jesus ever had to say were directed at the religious hypocrites, not the unbelievers.

Jesus didn't even leave us here with instructions to create Christian nations. What he left us here to do was to model life in the kingdom of God, wherever we happened to be. Not a kingdom known for fighting, or hostility, or judgment. Not a kingdom characterized by power or orthodoxy, but one characterized by grace and love; by forgiveness, and peace and compassion for the weak and poor. A kingdom where we love our enemies and pray for people who persecuted us. A kingdom where we are known for our kindness and gentleness and self-control. Truly subversive stuff. If our true goal is to make disciples, burning copies of the Qur'an isn't going to be nearly as compelling a gospel message as forgiving your enemy, or turning the other cheek.

I'd like to leave you with something from a session devotional that was written by an elder in one of my other churches several years before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but they are prophetic words for us today that can serve as our challenge as we try to live as Christ's disciples in a troubled time. This is based on the epistle reading this morning, the fruits of the Spirit:

Choose love, because no occasion justifies hatred and no injustice warrants bitterness. Today, love God, and what God loves.

Choose joy and refuse the temptation to be cynical. See the people you encounter as human beings created by God. View each problem as an opportunity to see and serve God.

Choose peace. Just for today, live forgiven. Forgive so that you may live.

Choose kindness. Be kind to the unkind, for that is how God has treated you.

-Written by Madelyn Thomas