

*“After Ten Years, Where’s the Hope?”*

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September 11, 2011

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Matthew 18:21-22

Anyone over fourteen years old can easily remember where they were and what they were doing when they first learned of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center ten years ago today. The images of that day will never be erased from our mind’s eye. From sea to shining sea Americans felt violated. Not since the War of 1812 had the land of the free and the home of the brave been attacked. Before September 11, 2001 most felt perfectly safe within our borders but after 9/11 that sense of security was shattered and it will never be completely restored. Even this weekend a “credible” terror threat has been reported and we were looking over our shoulder again. It has become a part of our national psyche!

On this day of remembrance, as we think back ten years we not only remember the death, destruction and scenes of panic we also remember a country uniting in long lines to give blood, motorcycles, cars and fire trucks proudly flying Old Glory, thousands of young men and women volunteering for military service, churches filled with people grieving, praying and hoping, a mass migration of doctors, firefighters, rescue dogs, truck drivers, chaplains, all kinds of rescue equipment and volunteers of every stripe finding their way to New York to help in any way they could. America rallies like no other country and in the midst of the horror of 9/11 there was a lovely spirit of hospitality and generosity. Ordinary citizens gave their lives for strangers and strangers became sisters’ and brothers’ keepers. The suffering of many on 9/11 triggered a wave of kindheartedness given by a stunned yet compassionate nation.

That first week, I remember a yearning to be in touch with loved ones. I had to hear the voice and be assured that Connie, Carrie, Ben, Natalie, Chad, family and friends, were alright. We needed one another and we needed God’s comfort. You may recall that we, at Fairmont, opened our doors on the evening of September 11, 2001 to invite our community in for a prayer service. Again, on Friday we welcomed the community for worship and prayers. We were all in shock and we needed to hear a word of hope, we needed to be with other mourners and we needed to sense the presence of the One who is “Maker of heaven and earth.”

That first Sunday after the attacks our sanctuary was packed. We worshipped, we prayed and we found strength in God and God's people. I preached the sermon "***Life After the Towers***" based on the same passage Brench read for us this morning. Because we still need God's reassurance after ten years, I am going to share a few paragraphs from "***Life After the Towers.***"

Quoting ten years ago "Life After the Towers":

"As a friend of mine, who lives in Xenia, came home from work on Tuesday, he was met by his young children who expressed their fear of being bombed. He wrapped them in his arms and assured them that they were not going to be bombed and that God was with them. But, if we were all honest, we would admit that it wasn't just the children that were filled with fear. We too were wondering "what was coming next?" What was the next target? How many more terrorists are there? *When the towers go down, where do we turn?*

The Old Testament book of *Habakkuk* gives us direction. The prophet Habakkuk could see that life was changing for God's people. As a prophet, God told Habakkuk that the dreaded Chaldeans were going to invade Israel and life would never be the same. So Habakkuk laments, "***Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls...***

Life, as normal, was coming to a screeching halt for Habakkuk and Israel. We know the experience. All air transportation grounded. The stock exchanged closed. Sporting and entertainment events canceled. Travel interrupted. The terrorists succeeded in disrupting normal American life like never before.

Yes, the images of this past week remind us that life has changed forever...just like it did for Habakkuk and Israel. But God is not finished with us yet! Habakkuk describes the coming tribulation to Israel and then he uses one of the most hopeful three letter words. "***YET!***" .... "***yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength***"

*Yet...there is a **power** stronger than the destruction we witnessed on Tuesday. Yet...there is a **hope** that far exceeds the vilest evil this world can produce. Yet...there is a **love** that will hold us securely even as the world changes all around us. Yet...there is a **faith** that will show us the way into an uncertain future.” Unquote*

Like ten years ago, this truth remains the same today! Our power, hope, love and faith *is* grounded in “*in the LORD; we will exult in the God of our salvation. God, the Lord, is our strength.”*

Perhaps we need this message of “*God, the Lord, is our strength*” more today than ever before. Ten years ago our foundation was shaken but our resolve was unbelievably strong. Today I sense a weariness in our great land which is extended throughout the whole wide world. We are weary of war....we are weary of economic uncertainties....we are weary of bombings....we are weary of politicians circling the wagons around their narrow view of reality....we are weary of fear.

Looking through my 9/11 file I came across an email from *Donna Poseidon* a former member of Fairmont who now lives in Atlanta. In the email she describes an experience her husband, *Lee*, had while in Germany during that week of September 11, 2001. Donna wrote, “*Lee has been in Germany since Monday and while I wish he were here I am glad he is not trying to get back to the States just now. I thought you would like to hear of his experience. It shows how those in other countries are reacting to him and other Americans specifically. He met with Mercedes Benz in Stuttgart all day today. They stopped the assembly line, which produces a car every 25 seconds, from 10 until 10:05 this morning, and all 40,000 employees stopped work in a moment of silence for the US victims and the US overall. He said everyone they have met with has first expressed their sympathy and support. All German flags were flying at half staff. They all realize it could have been one of their major cities that was targeted.*”

For the first time the world recognized that America was vulnerable. While we Americans don't like to feel vulnerable, from the world's point of view we had finally joined the rest of the world which accepts vulnerability as a part of nationhood. The world identified with a suffering America. The French paper *Le Monde* ran the headline, “*We are all Americans.*”

You may remember that within 90 days after the towers went down we had Osama bin Laden on the run in Afghanistan and the Taliban had fallen from power in Afghanistan through the work of 400 American CIA and Special Forces and many Afghan anti-Taliban fighters. I, personally, believe this was an appropriate use of military power.....going after the real enemy, bin Laden and Al Qaeda *in* Afghanistan.

However.....have you ever been sucker punched? Have you ever been betrayed? Have you ever been abused? While most of us haven't literally been sucker punched, all of have felt exposed, tricked, or ambushed by others. Once we shake off the grogginess and realize the personal nature of the attack there is something almost visceral that wells up within that cries out, ***"I'll get even. You're not going to get away with this."*** It is very human to want revenge when we have been terrorized either personally or as a nation.

Soon we began to hear about the "war on terror." After watching the towers fall and feeling the anguish that would not go away, we naturally wanted to hit the terrorists hard. After all we had been attacked, we were terrorized and we were feeling vulnerable. But how do you define "war on terror?" Our troops were doing a superb job of fighting the real terrorists in Afghanistan who masterminded the 9/11 attacks but somehow "war on terror" became defined as "war on Iraq." I believe the decision to invade Iraq was ill advised and our world is not in a better place because of this ill informed decision. I know many would not hold my view and I trust we can agree to disagree agreeably. But as I reflect on the past ten years I can only imagine what the decade would have been like if we had simply concentrated our amazingly well equipped and dedicated troops on the real enemy of Al Qaeda. I can only imagine what the decade would have been like if the trillions of dollars spent on war in Iraq would have been spent on debt reduction, schools, roads, and job training in our own country and support of third world countries like the newly formed *Republic of the South Sudan*. I can only imagine how many Sunni, Shiite and American lives would have been spared. I can only imagine how much less hatred there would be between Christians and Muslims. As we reflect on this past decade it seems obvious to me that *war is not the answer!*

But is there another way? Is there a better response to violence, both globally and personally, than hitting back?

Last week Denise introduced us to one of Jesus' difficult teachings in which our Lord instructs us to take the responsibility to go to those who have hurt us and seek reconciliation. In her sermon, Denise asked, ***“What am I willing to sacrifice to be reconciled to my brother or sister in faith so they may be restored to fellowship with me and to the larger church? Jesus’ words, along with being a challenge, are a calling. A calling to treat others as Jesus treats others, to treat others as Jesus treats us. A calling to reach out with love and forgiveness rather than shun, turn one’s back or write someone off. Very, very demanding and difficult, isn’t it? We need help from above to act as Jesus acts.”***

***“Building Community”*** by Rev. Denise Ingram, September 4, 2011

Sometimes we forget how demanding Jesus' teachings are. Denise is spot on when she says we need help from above to act as Jesus acts and to accept our calling to reach out with love and forgiveness. We all agree that we should forgive until we've been sucker punched, or betrayed or abused and then the Jesus way of forgiveness seems absurdly unrealistic.

In today's Gospel reading we, again, see how difficult the Jesus way is. Remember Jesus has just been teaching about reconciling with those who have harmed us and we read...

<sup>21</sup>*At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"* <sup>22</sup>*Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven."* --Matthew 18:21-22 (The Message)

Peter, no doubt, thought he was being incredibly magnanimous. But Jesus' "seventy times seven" makes it clear there are no limits to forgiveness in God's kingdom. Simply because Jesus challenges "seventy times seven" does not mean that Jesus thinks forgiveness is a snap of the fingers. I believe Jesus understands there will be periods in our lives when we cannot forgive because of the severity of our pain. However, even in our inability to forgive God understands why we are stuck there and God will continue to love us and gently move us toward the act of forgiveness.

And know that this side of the grave forgiveness may never be totally complete. Nevertheless, Jesus holds us to “*seventy times seven*” because he knows forgiveness is essential for life!

In Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC, poet and theologian, Frederick Buechner, writes, “*Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.*”

Jesus knows that anger, vengeance, and withholding forgiveness boomerangs to smack us in the face. He longs for us to live in freedom and harmony, so he challenges “*seventy times seven.*” He not only teaches but shows us the way by accepting the cross for us and, even on the cross, forgiving his enemies. Now Jesus is with us always to help us live into his wholeness.

Jesus shows us the way through people like *Nicholas Lanza* who, of all people, had good reason to hate and never forgive. (Story from September 12, 2011 Newsweek magazine)

Nicholas was 7 years old on September 11, 2001 and was living in New York City. His mother, Michele, worked for Franklin Templeton on the 97<sup>th</sup> floor of WTC building #2. Nicholas was at school that day and the teacher came into his room and told every student to go home. Nicholas went home with a friend and, with that family, Nicholas’ watched as his mother’s tower went down. After his mother’s memorial service he went to live with his Dad in Virginia. He writes, “*I had the hardest time accepting his stepmother. I was still wrestling with what I now call my ‘inner demons.’ They are called depression, wrath, and unforgiveness. They ruined my life for years.....I thought for the longest time that what happened on 9/11 was my fault. I could not forgive myself. I could not forgive the man who caused me the most harm: Osama bin Laden. I didn’t know how to handle the burden of being a 9/11 victim.*”

His demons continued to attack him until the summer before high school. ***“I went to a church camp. It turns out that it was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. You see, I was carrying the one thing that was wearing me down and leaving me broken. I was still carrying my mother. I wouldn’t let her go....But during one service, one of my good preacher friends and a few other ministers gather around me, and they began to pray for me. My preacher friend told me that it was time to let everything go. Throw it all away. For a moment, I didn’t know what was going on; all I could see was this blinding white light. A voice began to say, ‘You belong to me, my child. You shall no longer be burdened with these chains that you wear about you. You are free.....After I was redeemed at the church camp, I had a new desire. I wanted to be able to tell bin Laden that I forgave him for the hideous crime he committed against me.....Forgiveness is essential to really moving on from any tragic happening. I came to learn this through studying the word of God, prayer, and real-life experience.”*** Newsweek, September 12, 2011, P. 32-33.

Thank you, God, for bringing new life to Nicholas! Thank you, gracious God, for bringing new life to us this day!

As I was looking through my 9/11 file I came across the Newsweek of September 24, 2001. In it I found the political cartoon of a child asking his father, ***“Will we hate back?”*** Much of life comes down to how we answer that question. As we reflect on the past decade, we have to admit there has been a lot of hatred throughout the world.

What about the coming decade? ***“Will we hate back?”***

By the grace, mercy and peace of Jesus Christ, may you and I answer ***“No!”*** Our hope is found in Jesus Christ and choosing Jesus’ *“seventy times seven”* way of forgiveness.

Amen

(OVER)

Newsweek Magazine September 24, 2001

