

In the Shadow of No Towers

September 11, 2011

This past Thursday morning I, along with dozens of other people going to their various destinations, got on a plane and took off from Bergstrom International Airport, up into the sky. The plane was heading to Phoenix. From there, I would go on to Santa Barbara to officiate at a friend's wedding. Where the others in my plane were going, I didn't know. But in *that* moment, early in the morning, at the beginning of just another work day, we all shared a time and a space, and a faith that this big metal flying machine would take us where we needed to go.

As the plane rose, we became aware of the smoke in the air. For miles and miles, a thick haze hovered over the earth, rising from the fires of Central Texas. Below us, to the East and to the West, some 1,400 homes smoldered in the ruins. Our plane flew above and beyond the disaster, into vast open sky, onward to safety.

I had planned to write on the plane, to begin this sermon with a perspective of 30,000 feet or so, writing with a bird's eye view of the world. Instead, I slept, my head nodding un-rhythmically, as dozing travelers' heads often do. And then we were over Arizona, and down on the ground,

and we all stepped off the plane and went our separate ways, continuing on in our separate lives.

Doze as I did while flying through the air, I did not and do not miss the significance of the juxtaposition of *this* flight a few days ago with those that departed from Boston, Newark, and Washington, DC, ten years ago today. Aside from those whose particular intention was to bring those planes down, all who boarded those planes on September 11, 2001, had the same assumption my plane-full of people did, that these flights would bring us from one place to another, and we would disembark, move on to our next flights, our jobs, our schools, weddings to attend, family reunions, and we would simply continue living.

But on September 11, 2001, terror came instead. And we, all across the country, watched shocked, stupefied, flinching at the very sky under which we walked. How could this be happening? *What* was happening? Would there be more? How in the world could two such giant edifices, such gargantuan symbols of our country, years in the building, come tumbling down in under an hour, killing thousands?

Similarly, on a lesser scale but no less significant to our own lives, on Thursday morning there I was flying in a plane that would land safely elsewhere, while down below fires were spreading out of control. How

could it be that so many residents of Central Texas had woken up last Sunday morning expecting to go about their daily lives, only to find the winds of Tropical Storm Lee joining forces with our severe drought to wipe out thousands of square miles of homes, farmland, and wildlife in a matter of days? Why could some of us fly so freely over it, while others watched their homes and their histories turned to cinder?

True, the circumstances of the past week stem from natural causes, whereas the events of September 11, 2001, were planned and carried out by a group of men convinced that in order to alleviate the suffering of some, they needed to create suffering for others.

But it is just that--*suffering*--that is the common ground on which we today in Texas stand alongside the people of New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. Suffering is what brought our entire country together then, and as we move through these fires, and the earthquakes and hurricanes scattered across the country during these past few weeks, once more we confront sorrow, bewilderment, angst, and the humbling truth that we are not in control.

Clouds of ash come down, clouds of smoke rise up. The very breath of life is *laden* with ash, smoke, dust, even bones, and we wonder how we

will make it through. Who and what will we turn to? Media meddlers? Masters of marketing? Politicians posing as prophets?

Or might we get a little more countercultural than that? Might we consider letting go of our various, ever readily available idolatries and instead seek solace, *find* revelation even, in the inescapable truth that we are all in this together and that therefore we must actually *work through* our *suffering* together?

Saadi, the thirteenth century Sufi poet, reminds us of the simplicity of the work of religious people such as us, when he states, “To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people. It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes. All people are members of the same body.” he says, “created from the same essence. If fate brings suffering to one member the others cannot stay at rest.”

“If fate brings suffering to one member the others cannot stay at rest.” Do you remember how all across the *world*, in the days after 9/11, people could not rest but gathered in mourning and solidarity, bowing their heads, lighting candles, carrying signs that said, “We are all Americans”? Do you remember that brief, oh so brief time that we had to actually grieve and to discern, and that it seemed for a moment that our suffering was going to be lessened by the compassion of one another?

Then words like ‘retaliation’ and “if you’re not with us, you’re with them,” and “we’re gonna smoke ‘em out” and “bring ‘em on,” started being used, and grief and compassion got pushed aside to make room for jingoism and revenge, as if our nation was saying, “We don’t need your silly little compassion; we’ll pull ourselves up by our own boot straps, thank you.” And now, on this tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, though our foreign policy has since mellowed its belligerent tone a bit, and while messages of forgiveness and reconciliation are in the air, I admittedly wonder how much *atoning* there still is to do, alongside forgiving?

After all, the season of Yom Kippur is upon us, and as I think back on these past ten years since the towers came falling down and following right after them our particularly American assumption of invincibility, I can’t help but just about conclude we have avoided facing conflict within ourselves and within our nation by going to war with others.

Think of the words from the Jewish liturgy, “O source of peace, lead us to peace, a peace profound and true; lead us to a healing, to mastery of all that drives us to war within ourselves and with others. May our deeds inscribe us in the Book of life and blessing, righteousness and peace!” In the ten years since 9/11, have we been inscribed in the book of life?

I know from my own experiences that in the days and months after 9/11 there were thousands upon thousands of people throughout this country who sought, and who still seek such a path of peace. And I dread to imagine where this world would be today if there hadn't been extraordinary efforts at interfaith dialogue and understanding.

But how much do we actually incorporate such prayer as I just read into our *daily* lives today? What if we, as a religious community, actually *prayed*, not just read, this together? Will you, please, pray with me, by repeating these words? "O source of peace,/ lead us to peace,/ a peace profound and true;/ lead us to a healing,/ to mastery of all that drives us to war/ within ourselves/ and with others./ May our deeds inscribe us/ in the Book of life and blessing,/ righteousness and peace!" Once more: "O source of peace,/ lead us to peace,/ a peace profound and true;/ lead us to a healing,/ to mastery of all that drives us to war/ within ourselves/ and with others./ May our deeds inscribe us/ in the Book of life and blessing,/ righteousness and peace!"

Praying this together, can we perhaps more deeply feel both our mutual suffering and our collective compassion? After all, who among us here has not at some time been driven to war both within ourselves and with others? Whether within the larger society, our own Wildflower

community, our own families, or our own souls, have we not experienced the infliction of suffering, and do we not congregate each week, at least in part, in hopes of being relieved of some of our suffering?

The catch to finding relief, though, is it takes work on our part. It takes struggle. It doesn't just take boot straps; it takes humility. Nor is it going to happen magically. Think of the beatitudes of Jesus, from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

Blessed are you poor. The realm of God is yours.

Blessed are you who hunger today. You shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep today. You shall laugh.

Blessed are the humble. They will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful. They will find mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be ranked as children of God.

If these words are true, if the realm of God, or love, or justice, or peace, is meant to belong to the blessed poor, if the humble are meant to inherit the earth, if the peacemakers are indeed children of God, or love, or

justice, or peace, well, I'd say the humble and the poor and the peacemakers have some fierce resistance in front of them. For it seems to me it's the arrogant and the rich and the warmongers who have been holding dominion over the earth for quite some time. And so if we try to believe, in the words of comedian Sara Silverman, that "Jesus is magic," that because he says the beatitudes, like a magic spell they're going to happen, then we've got another thing coming. For Jesus wasn't a magician. He was a rabbi. He was a teacher. And teachers teach their students certain ways of being and working in the world.

And guess what. We are students. And we have to learn new ways of being and working in the world. Specifically, we have to learn that we are the ones who must side with the poor, we are the ones who must be the peacemakers. For, as Dr. King said, change is not going to "roll in on the wheels on inevitability."

Jesus also said, "You are the light of the world. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under a bushel, but on the lampstand, where it gives light to everyone in the house." Well, how many lamps are here in this sacred space? And how many of you lamps keep putting yourselves under a bushel because either you are waiting for someone else to do the shining

for you, or you're thinking, what I do with my light is nobody else's business. I'll do with it what I want.

Either strategy--waiting for a savior or refusing for whatever reason to save others--doesn't take the rest of the world into consideration. If you, if we, are the light of the world, and you hide, we, ourselves *from* the world, then the world lives in darkness.

On September 11, 2001, over 400 members of the New York City fire department were called to the world trade centers. And they came rushing. And they shined their light. In the words of Bruce Springsteen, as we heard Dana sing earlier, "Left the house this morning, bells ringing filled the air, wearin' the cross of my calling, on wheels of fire I came rolling down here." By the end of the morning, 343 of those firefighters had lost their lives. They had died making every effort to save the lives of others. Their lives, their deeds of that morning, their sacrifice, I believe, inscribed them in the book of life.

And that, to be inscribed in the book of life and blessing, righteousness and peace, is what I would ask we strive for as our commemoration of *all* those who perished on September 11, and all those who mourn their loss today. Of course I'm not asking us to sacrifice our lives, or endanger them like the firefighters did. But in the spirit of

atonement, in the spirit of praying for and working for peace, in the spirit of our commitment to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice, I ask us to ask ourselves, how have I hidden my own light, and how can I make it shine, so that it touches everyone in the house of this earth we call home?

For indeed, the suffering continues, and indeed the call for compassion in action still rings. Just this morning, I read in the Austin American Statesman that out of the 24 members of the Heart of the Pines fire department right here in Central Texas, 11 of them lost their homes to the fires this past week. Also this past week, I have received emails from Wildflowers asking what we can do to help survivors of the fire, as well as emails and facebook notices sharing all sorts of possibilities for aid. I'm sure many if not most of you have already found one way to offer help. As a congregation, we will create at least one formal response, most likely through a special offering in the coming days.

But it's not just about giving money. It's about giving our lives over to the values we proclaim. Sometimes that might seem just a little inconvenient to the comforts we desire. But remember the words of Mohammed Iqbal.

Where in our hearts is that burning of love?

It is true that we are made of dust and the world is also made of dust. But the dust has motes rising.

Whence comes that drive in us?

We look to the starry sky and love storms in our hearts.

Whence comes that storm?

The journey of love is a very long journey,

But sometimes with a sigh you can cross that vast desert.

Search and search again without losing hope;

You may find sometime a treasure on your way.

My heart and my eyes are all devoted to the vision.

May our hearts and our eyes be devoted to the vision. May we all cross that vast desert that often is the journey of true love. Search and search again without losing hope. The treasure you find will be your own light, shining on the suffering of the world. And out of the ashes, wildflowers will bloom. Each one of you has compassion to offer, love to share, beauty to give. Never say you can't. I know you can. Amen.