

“Dwell Together In Peace”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar
Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma
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First Reading Romans 12:12-21

Let hope keep you joyful; in trouble stand firm; persist in prayer; contribute to the needs of God's people, and practice hospitality. Call down blessings on your persecutors – blessings, not curses. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in agreement with one another. Do not be proud, but be ready to mix with humble people. Do not keep thinking how wise you are.

Never pay back evil for evil. Let your aims be such as all count honorable. If possible, so far as it lies with you, live at peace with all. May dear friends, do not seek revenge, but leave a place for divine retribution; for there is a text which reads, 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.' But there is another text: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; by doing this you will heap live coals on his head.' Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to conquer evil.

Second Reading by Marion Winick, writer in Pennsylvania, (read on NPR this week).

How does this sound: Mothers against symbolism...Mothers against religion and ideology...and finally, mothers against indiscriminate revenge. Mother's against symbolism is dedicated to the proposition that the World Trade Center was a building not a symbol of American power or riches or world domination. It was a big building full of people. So for that matter was the pentagon...if the terrorists wanted to destroy a symbol they should have gone for the Statue of Liberty - at night. They could have paint-balled the Washington monument. But even if they destroyed those symbols they could not have destroyed the ideas they stand for.

What can be destroyed are buildings and people and that's what they have done. By this act the terrorists have destroyed what is most sacred to me. That is human life. To me any ideology or religious belief that makes something more important than human life is anti-sacred. And I'm against it.

If the belief in an afterlife makes people more inclined to kill and die I am against that too. At the college where I teach, people are walking around with red-eyes and broken hearts asking each other, "did you lose someone?" For so many of us the answer is no, but yes. As members of what turns out to be an American family we are wondering: "who's going to read the bedtime stories, who's going to kiss the boo boos, even who's going to walk the dog... not to mention who's going to explain all of this?"

This is why people are waiting for hours to give blood. Why former New Yorkers like myself keep feeling we need to go home and help clean up. Why almost no one can think without tears of the children of New York and Washington DC...of the husbands and wives of the flight crews... the passengers with the cell phones in their hands.

I beg our president, please for God's sake, don't kill anymore innocent people. Don't attempt to relieve our suffering by spreading it...Don't make our freedom the equivalent of whatever those conspirators believed in.

Families in Kabul are no more guilty of this crime than...families here in Glenrock, Pennsylvania. And we are all part of a bigger family a world family. I do not mean this in a symbolic way.

I stood before you in this pulpit exactly one week ago and said: "This current generation of American leaders (referring to people in their 20's, 30's, 40's and 50's) have been largely untouched by war." Within less than 48 hours of that statement, the whole world began to look different. This morning I stand before you deeply saddened by what has taken place and deeply troubled by what might come next.

I received a call from the religion editor at the Tulsa World this week (you may have seen the article on the front page of today's paper): He wanted to know how I thought the events on the east coast were going to effect religion, churches, synagogues and mosques in America. I told him I thought they'd all be full this weekend as people gathered to pray and to look to the clergy for a religious perspective. I told him that we've all been saturated with the perspectives of politicians, the media and military leaders – and many of them have been talking about good and evil in very simplistic terms. That's what we're used to in this “sound bite” culture. This weekend, however, it's crucial that religious leaders clarify what these terms mean and how they apply to the current situation.

In the book of Romans 12:9 it says: “Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” It's simple and straight forward...The truth of that statement is so clear it's self-evident. It transcends religious differences and arguments about translations and the source of revelation. “Abhor what is evil; cleave to that which is good.”

What's not so simple is determining what is evil and what is good. Cicero said: “The inability to tell good from evil is the greatest worry of man's life.” Now some might say, “well Cicero didn't have the New Testament to refer to and that's why he found it so difficult to decipher good from evil.”

But, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson have the New Testament and are claiming that what happened this week is the fault of the Federal Courts, gays and lesbians, feminists, the pro-choice movement and groups like the ACLU. They're telling their followers that the American people have brought this on themselves by allowing these evils to flourish in our land. And so, they claim God has stopped protecting us. Such divisive and discriminatory comments insult common decency and insult even God!

Obviously then, having the benefit of the New Testament is not enough to help us distinguish between good and evil. So, what was the evil that plowed its way into our country and our consciousness this week? How we answer this question may be one of the most profound moral judgments we make as a nation in our lifetimes.

The most apparent evil, the one that no reasonable person would argue with is the killing of innocent people. Some are saying it was an attack on civilization itself, or on freedom itself or on the American way of life – each of these claims is questionable. The real evil is that there are spouses that woke up Tuesday morning and shared conversation over breakfast and then said goodbye, not knowing that they would never see, hear or touch the person they love ever again. There are children - lots of children, who don't understand why their father or mother will never kiss their head and tuck them into bed again, will never attend their recital, their graduation, their wedding...There are conversations never finished, sentiments never expressed and so many opportunities lost... Taking those lives away was evil.

Now, we must imagine that the terrorists in this case were so convinced that what they were doing was rooting out evil in the world. They were so sure about the evil being spread by America throughout the world, that they were willing to kill innocent people in order to stop it. They were even willing to give their own lives.

Keep in mind that many things get called evil – Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson have their opinions about what is evil. Various extremists of all religions and political positions have their opinions. Even sane, well educated, freedom loving people have opinions about what is evil in our world, and they don't always agree.

However, the one evil in the events of this past week that is so clear and so visible that we can all agree it is truly evil is the tragic loss of innocent men, women and children. So, let me suggest that we make that our starting point. Let us make that the plumb-line by which we judge good and evil. If we do, however, we may be unpopular. You see, it doesn't really make sense? How can it be, you might ask? How can it be unpopular

to hold a position that is rational, well accepted and self-evident about what constitutes evil in these current events? How can such a position be unpopular – some might even call it un-American?

For the answer to this dilemma I went back to one of the great theologians of the 20th century - Reinhold Niebuhr. Between the World Wars, Niebuhr wrote a book called *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. In it he describes why it is so difficult for nations to be ethical. He talks about how the rational understanding of political issues in a nation is so minimal that there are only two ways to achieve national unity to take action. The first is if the action is in the self-interest of the dominant group that controls the government. That's obvious, if the people in charge want to do it, they can usually make it happen. The second is if the action is "supported by the popular emotions and hysterias which from time to time run through a nation. In other words, a nation['s unity]...is held together much more by force and emotion than by mind." (88) 1

These comments remind me of the story about when an enthusiastic woman approached Adlai Stevenson at a rally during his first Presidential campaign against Eisenhower and said, "Governor, every thinking person in America will be voting for you."

And he replied, "Madam, that's not enough, I need a majority."

This is a bit humorous, but, I'm trying to laugh a basic point into all of this. Ethical action requires self-criticism, and self-criticism requires rational thinking and a degree of self-transcendence. The problem is, according to Niebuhr, that when nations get overcome with popular emotions and patriotic hysteria, the mind takes a back seat to emotions and it makes ethical action impossible.

It is at this time more than ever, that our nation needs us, you and me, intelligent, thinking, compassionate people who are dedicated to democracy and justice. This is not the time to put our critical gifts away in a lock-box and to get swept up in popular emotions. Let us help unite the country for God's sake, but not at the expense of our ethical and moral responsibilities.

Niebuhr talks about the ethical paradox of patriotism. It's that patriotism has the wonderful, altruistic element of allowing people to go beyond their own self-interest and identify with something larger than themselves. Within patriotism there is a degree of living out of the spiritual ideal of transcending one's own self-interest and identifying with a larger purpose. However, on occasion, Niebuhr explains, that the altruistic impulse expresses itself with "...such fervor that the critical attitude of the individual toward the nation and its enterprises is almost completely destroyed. The unqualified character of this devotion is the very basis of the nation's power and of the freedom to use that power without moral restraint. Thus, the unselfishness of the individual makes for the selfishness of nations."(91). 2

This is the ethical paradox in patriotism. The danger is, "the sentiment of patriotism [can achieve] a potency in the modern soul, so unqualified, that the nation is given carte blanche to use the power, for any purpose it desires." (92). 3 And the most outrageous part about this is that the times when these sentiments are most strong are exactly at the times that the nation is engaged in aggression or defense. Therefore, it is at the times when nations are making the most consequential decisions about life, death and destruction, that their ethical and moral critique is at its lowest.

What I find the most interesting is that on any given night over the past year I could have been over for dinner at any one of your homes and probably at any home of anyone across America. At some point during the course of the evening, politics or current affairs might have come up for conversation. Without question, we would have discussed a range of views regarding the state of America and the world. The past year makes for a perfect example because we have had two different presidents from two different parties and the issues I am talking about are not specifically Republican or Democrat. We might have spoken positively about how fortunate we are to have all of the freedoms and opportunities and luxuries that we do have. However, at some point we might have talked about some of the trends in popular music, movies, video

games and TV that we suspect may be having a negative affect on children. We might have spoken of our disappointment about some of the decisions our leaders are making regarding the environment, the arms trade, or any number of issues in international affairs. Someone might have even dared to raise the issue that our government keeps training and arming rebel fighters such as Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden who turn around and use our education not just against their own people, but against the American people. “Why?” we might ask do we keep doing this to ourselves.

It wouldn't be totally out of the ordinary for some of the concepts of individualism, materialism, consumerism, the continued prevalence of racism and other social ills to have made their way into the conversation. But this week, there are people who are baffled at how anyone could possibly see anything significantly wrong with the American way of life. It's like a case of mass selective amnesia. I've never seen anything like it. And yet as troubling as this might be, it's also positive in so many ways.

At a time like this we need to pull together and transcend our differences. I am so proud of how the American people, you and I and others, have pulled together to support one another, to donate blood, to give money and to stand behind each other. The outpouring of love and help has been incredible. Incredible! The stories of heroism – great and small give me a renewed faith in the human spirit. During the week I've had a chance to talk with groups of our children about what is going on around the country. In two of those meetings there were children who told stories of how a child in their class was being harassed because they had an Arab heritage. And two of our children told me how they stood up for their friend and for what is right, decent and good.

I'll tell you what I told them, “That, is an act of heroism.” We have heard about the amazing dedication of the firefighters and rescue workers, about people carrying a woman in a wheel chair down 60 or more flights of stairs and other feats of great valor and bravery. Yet, for a child to stand up to his or her teacher and peers in a classroom also takes an immense amount of courage and I told them, to me, they're heroes.

It's because of what I have seen around me from the majority of my fellow countrymen and women and children that I am more proud then ever to sing the songs that speak of the ideals of this nation. I am proud to fly my flag and wear a ribbon to show that I am in solidarity with all who suffer and mourn due to the events of the past week. For me it's a statement that I mourn too – and I hold out hope for a better tomorrow.

But as James Bryce has said, “Patriotism consists not of waving the flag, but in striving that our country shall be righteous as well as strong.” I want to be counted among the greatest of American patriots – the heroes of the revolutionary war, the Abe Lincolns, the suffragettes and the Martin Luther Kings. In my mind, these were not people who were caught up in the sentimentality of patriotism, or the popular hysteria and emotions of their times. They are the ones who were thinkers for their nation. The ones who risked providing a critical and ethical analysis which called this country to live up to a larger vision. It is the vision of a country that could put these words on its Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

For me that torch sheds light on a vision we cannot give up on even though we have continually fallen short of its goals of liberty, equality and inclusivity. The best American citizen is one who does not pretend we have achieved the vision, but one who has not given up on its incredible possibility.

Which takes me to another great line from Romans Ch. 12: “Never payback evil for evil.” And that is why I must strongly disagree with the editors of the Tulsa World who wrote in Thursday's paper: “...the act was serious enough that the US will accept some amount of collateral damage – injuries or deaths of people not directly involved – in striking back. That is the proper reaction.” (Sept 13, 2001)

To which I say, please no! Don't try to assuage our suffering by creating even more. When the World editors speak of collateral damage – injuries or deaths of people not directly involved – they're talking about innocent people just like the family members who were killed in New York and Washington DC. The one undisputable evil in the recent terrorists action is the taking of innocent lives – sacred human lives. If we turn around and do the same – let us not fool ourselves into thinking what we are doing is good. The prophet Isaiah warned: “Woe unto them that call evil good.” (5:20)

Maybe if the elected leaders of the people of Afghanistan or some other democratic country waged a popular war against America, this would be a different sermon. However, the people of Afghanistan have been so beaten down, starved, raped, and exploited that they haven't even chosen their own leaders, let alone the leaders of the terrorist organization that feeds off their country's weakness and wounds. Bombing and killing little children and their parents in Kabul would be a travesty of justice.

Let us bring those responsible to account for their deeds using laws and other just means – and not at the expense of our own morality. “Patriotism consists not [simply] of waving the flag, but in striving that our country shall be righteous as well as strong.”

I ask you to join me in a moment in singing a hymn which is not a battle cry or a triumphal march, it's a prayer: a prayer which rightly asks: “...America! America! God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self control , Thy liberty in law....Till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine!”

Amen.

1 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.

2 Niebuhr, 91.

3 Niebuhr, 92.