

Counter Terrorism

“Remember. Heal. Lead.”

Colossians 3:12-17

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September 11, 2011
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Reliving the Terror

Ten years. How can we help but mark the anniversary of attack but by reliving it? For the first time since September 16, 2001 I opened my notes to recall what I preached. I started out:

“I would rather not have to think of the ordeal we’ve been through all week. I would rather have in my mind the picture in one of our vacation albums: the one I took of the twin towers shining white and tall against a deep blue summer sky.

“I would rather remember looking down Wall Street, flags of the nations joining the Stars and Stripes in a wind-dance, caught by the dazzle of the sun.

“I would rather think of the man on the subway who dashed the image of insensitive New Yorkers and freely rescued us onto the right subway train.

“I’d rather think of these things instead of the images this week, now burned into my mind: the Towers bursting with flames caused by the worst of cruelty. The inhumanity. The stories of struggles on board the aircraft. Word that a cousin was working across the street from the Pentagon, so close to peril...and that her son’s best friend since sixth grade was killed in one of the blasts all underscored to me that this terror is personal.

“I think: personal to us all.

“Our land...our house has been invaded. The catastrophe smacks of the essence of hatred: separation of person from person, culture from culture. It even makes us want to raise our fists toward God, if we will be honest, and cry out, “Why?” Tuesday morning wants to separate us even from the Holy One.

“There’s no mistaking what evil will produce: fear... rage... hatred... separation...and we ask God, ‘Why?’”

That’s what I tried to deal with and how I tried to deal with it. In fact, maybe this was something like what we all tried to understand. Almost right away we said that life would never be the same. Now ten years later it seems we were right. We’ve been on

some kind of alert ever since. The days of meeting our loved ones at airport gates are gone – probably forever. This past Friday night as a large group from our church entered Comerica Park they even had us take off our hats so the gatekeepers could be certain we weren't bringing anything under them but our heads. Now we're under another heightened alert. Precautions are a way of life. All that.

We've been living with it ever since. Ten years later: and the papers, the television, even the Internet are almost as filled with the scenes and stories as they were then. It seems right that we remember and take stock. Yet, while we remember it's hard not to also *relive* it.

Remembering Ourselves

That's where I want to feel a bit of caution.

We need to honor and remember the thousands who died that day. We need to mark the time and consider what we have gone through and what we have learned. We need stand in awe, once again, as we recall the remarkable courage and sacrifice made by first responders and the people on board Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania and those who have served and to protect us since.

We need to look back and give thanks for the grace of God that held us, even then – and has endeavored to lead us on our way to this day.

This is what remembrance does: and it is healthy and noble and good. Remember it: yes; but re-live it?

Is it a good thing to re-live the trauma? Is it healthy to re-live the fear? And is it good to go back to the rage? Really?

Rage has a purpose, to-be-sure. It responds to grave wrong, wells up out of deep anguish, and it cries for justice. Rage motivates. And for America it had a hand in raising us from stunned wreckage and drove us to move forward. It was some of the power that moved us from chaos and into control.

But how long can living in rage be good for a person or a nation?

Have you ever heard of someone being consumed by their anger or consumed by hatred??

When the rage is righteous as surely ours after 9/11 must have been, it seems like all Jesus' words about forgiveness and loving your enemy need an exception. Like there has to be a footnote that says, "This can be overlooked if the sin against you is very, very bad. Then you don't need to love. You don't need to forgive."

Look for the footnote but you won't find one. I wonder if that's why church attendance in this country enjoyed an upward spike for only a couple of weeks after the attacks then slid quickly lower than before.

Because the message of Jesus' gospel is all about moving beyond the rage; being controlled by his Spirit than the evil you face. And I'm not sure that's what many people wanted to hear.

But living a new life of love with compassion,

kindness,

humility,

quiet strength,

patience with others who don't seem to deserve it:

these are the core characteristics of new life in Christ. The writer of Colossians in the Bible knew that. It's what he was trying to get across.

He said to do that you need to bear with one another and forgive.

Granted, he was speaking first about practicing this in the Christian community. But he winds up applying this to every detail in your lives.¹

It's another challenge to move beyond the old way of being, where *harboring of rage* comes naturally, and embracing a new day when you can begin new relationships with those who would be enemies.

The early Christians did not have it any easier than we do. The atrocities they faced, if anything, were even more horrible than ours. Yet, while still allowing justice, Jesus and his followers gave us this ethic.

While police actions are necessary to protect homeland and friends and bring perpetrators of terror to justice; Christians are also called work for the making of a different world. We are to march to a different drum beat so to speak, because Christ is, after all, a very different drummer.

Forgiveness and compassion for one another within the church is the first concern we should have, and we should not rest as long as we fall short of it.

There is more purpose in being church than having a sanctuary away from the world. We are God's test case; God's example. We can be living proof that the way God intends to make the world is true. We are called to be a catalyst, treating others who are not in Christ as though they already are. Everybody. This is the challenge of the whole of the New Testament.

The message this Good News has for us now has much more to do with our attitude. Do we continue to hate and rage, or do we rise above it, no matter how badly we are hurt? For now this Christian Way we keep talking about is no longer theoretical if it ever was. It is real.

It is now.

Its challenge: unavoidable.

Do we do the Christian thing only until we are hurt too badly for it to apply? Is there a point at which we can set the different way of Christ, aside? If there is, then what hope is there for the world?

There's got to be a way to break the cycle of hatred and rage...and there is.

A group from the church I served then in 2001 gathered after our last worship service, the Sunday morning after. Together, we went to a nearby and almost empty Middle Eastern restaurant and had a meal. One of the church members had quickly written a letter of support and encouragement, expressing the love of Christ with words of concern for the owners' family and friends; he hand-delivered it when the meal was over.

It turns out that we weren't unique. There were responses like that made by churches across the country. Many Christians throughout the West have spent time to understand Islam and the Middle East; to know its peoples' hardships and realize the

conditions that make good people vulnerable to the propaganda of the terrorist organizers. Countless Christians have reached out with ministries to build schools and alleviate suffering.

In the face of our deep grief: there has been compassion.

Bridges between people have been built.

I know that policing actions are necessary. And I am grateful for the men and women who put themselves in harm's way to protect us. But in the long run: terrorism cannot be countered by the work of war alone. It may hold it in check in the short-run. But in the long run, counter-terrorism is the work of love.

Remembering God's Dream

I have watched a little of the televised programs commemorating the anniversary. One of them, aired late at night, showed an interview of a New York firefighter. He was being a part of a documentary on the New York City Department when the planes hit the towers and all chaos broke loose. They happened to be at Ground Zero when the planes hit the World Trade Center. The show I saw ran some of the video footage they took in Tower 2's lobby when the unit that was first on the scene entered and took charge. Firefighters were systematically meeting the people, giving them directions to exit. All orderly, professional, caring.

The man in the interview said that many of the men and women in the film were his friends who, a few minutes later, would lose their lives. He said that they went up the stairwells, floor-after-floor. Helping the injured, giving directions to the able to move them to safety, encouraging the fearful, telling everyone to move. Then they kept going up with nothing but compassion: a mission at hand until they couldn't go any further.

Their professions – their lives – were defined by a covenant to rescue people in peril even at their own sacrifice. Like followers of Jesus, you and me, called to rescue the perishing by the grace of God.

He said that you hear again and again about the 3,000 victims. But, he said, you have to realize that 20,000 people were saved that day. That's the real story. It was the courage and the compassion of those who gave their lives to rescue so many.²

Courage and compassion to love. If there's anything to relive today, perhaps it's that. I looked at my sermon then, and I don't think I'd change anything now:

"The triumph, you see, will be the Love of God that tenaciously prevails over any chaos, any evil that tries to stop it. This is God's answer to our anguished plea.

"This is what will stand out to me: the Love of God which connects you and me to people of Washington and New York, Dearborn and even Bagdad.

"And the love of God calls us to join our hands
declare a victory and work for a peace
that only God's hand can bring about."

¹ Andrew T. Lincoln. "The Letter to the Colossians," New Interpreter's Bible Commentary vol. XI. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2000. pp 647-649.

² James Hanlon, on Charlie Rose, PBS. Friday, September 9, 2011.
http://cbs11tv.com/press/local_story_222133757.html