

Love and Terror
Reflections on 9/11
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The First Parish in Needham
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Reading: “Do Unto Others...” by Beth Miller

There will be time for talk of what has happened and is happening in our world. There will be, I am afraid, too long a time when this is with us every day. We will analyze, react, reevaluate, think it through, try to make sense of it all, and talk. Such words will fill all the spaces of our lives, I'm afraid. But not this morning. This morning, we need to be with our hearts.

The thing I am really burning to say to you today is that I love you. I am so grateful for each one of you in my life. I am so grateful for the love you offer me, and for the love you offer one another and your friends and family and neighbors and the world.

Love is the word in my heart right now. We just naturally know about love and instantly stop taking it for granted in the face of this crisis, and that is a good thing. A very good thing. The outpourings of love the world around is my source of comfort and hope.

Such is the power of Love - that it is within us and that it comes to the forefront of our hearts and minds when we most need it, and that it reaches out and across incredible barriers to touch others. For this I am so grateful.

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When I first started thinking about preaching a sermon about terrorism and September 11th, it crossed my mind what an unseasonable thing that would be. It is nowhere close to the anniversary, so why bring it up?

The reasons for this sermon are selfish, I have to admit. I have just finished a thesis on Unitarian Universalist sermons preached after September 11th, and I wanted to share the results of my research. It was only later that the conflict over the Gaza strip again reached a boiling point, making this sermon not so unseasonable after all. While I will not speak at length on that issue, Gaza reminds me that we live in a world where violence and terror are parts of our daily lives. Violence and terror did not start or end on September 11th, though they did come closer to home than many of us are accustomed to.

I remember where I was when I heard the news about September 11th. I was in my first semester at Miami University of Ohio. I walked into my earliest class that day at nine in the morning. The class had the television on and my fellow students were transfixed by what they saw on the screen. I sat down for a few minutes, watching, trying to figure out what was so interesting.

I still did not know exactly what was happening when the professor came in and switched off the television. But I knew that something terrible was happening, something that was changing the world in front of my eyes. The professor began her lecture on theories of communication. I don't remember a single word of the lecture, because it had not a word to speak to the event that was taking place that day.

But my experience in that class was not unique. My feeling in the weeks to come was that a powerful silence was settling over the event, and that we had few if any words to speak into the silence of that horrifying day that we call 9/11. This is what I decided to write my thesis about, the question of what our systems of meaning, of what our

theologies could say to the terrible lack of meaning that is a part of any understanding of September 11th.

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This not-knowing-what-to-say, what I call the silence of 9/11, is reflected again and again in the sermons preached the Sunday following the event. Many of the preachers began their sermons by stating this. Beth Miller, then the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Carmel, California, put it this way, “What can I say to you this morning, knowing that I’m your minister, and you probably need a word from me today more than any other day we’ve shared, and yet being as sad and as confused as each of you?”

Other ministers reflected a similar concern. What was there to say to such violence that would not be wholly trite and meaningless? How could any person stand up in front of a congregation that morning when all he or she wanted to do was collapse into the despair that almost everyone experienced. Many of the ministers that day said that they felt, more than any other time, like frauds, like they were putting on a show when all they wanted to do was feel the sadness and confusion that was present to all of us that week.

This is what I call the silence of 9/11. It is the essence of terror, where the event of terrorism split people from one another. It pulls us apart into our own isolated worlds. A woman who lived through the bombing of Hiroshima put it this way: “When the bomb dropped, we all became completely separate human beings.” The same is true for 9/11. After the fall of the towers, we became completely separate human beings. We felt like we were alone in the world, in our anger and in our pain. This is where every minister who preached the Sunday after the terrorist attack had to begin.

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There was a desperation for answers after the event. I can remember this clearly, I can remember my own anxiety over wondering what was to be done. I can remember the questions of our options in the days and months ahead. And of course, the question of who had sanctioned or caused the event. We all had so many questions, and so few answers.

No one seemed to have the answers that we wanted. Often what we were left with only the repetition of images, again and again, on the television. “We get drips and drabs,” the Rev. Daniel O’Connell told his congregation after the event. “It gives us a few facts, a commercial break, comes back, and tells us the same information again, while in the background, the smoke and dust and plane-into-the-building video plays over & over & over again, as if it will gain more reality if we just keep seeing it again.”

O’Connell’s observation is dead on. In the days following 9/11 I can remember being glued to the television, watching the brief footage of the planes hit the towers again and again. What did we accomplish in doing this? There was a feeling that if we kept watching, if we just watched the horror long enough, we might get it, we might touch some piece of reality that we were missing. Perhaps our many, many questions would be answered.

But they were not answered. The footage just replayed again and again while we gained no new information. Confusion and uncertainty were part of our daily experience after the fall of the towers. Something was coming, but few thought that it would be good.

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In the midst of the isolation and the despair, in the presence of images that led only to further confusion and uncertainty, we caught glimpses of something different. Something that pointed to a way out, or a way beyond. To a different way of thinking about 9/11. Many of the ministers who preached after 9/11 tried to reflect on this, to describe what this would look like.

The Rev. Forrest Church, who preached his sermon to the congregation of All Souls in the heart of New York City, pointed to one source of pushing us beyond the terror. He turned to the lives of those who were lost in the attack, reading their obituaries. I would like to share a few of those:

Cora Holland

“I loved my mother’s hands, her extensions of her soul,” Nate Holland, now 19, said in eulogizing his mother... “She had hands like silken clay, forever soft and always warm. When I was a child she would tuck me into bed and run them through my hair as we talked until we could talk no more. I would drift into sleep as her fingers floated across my scalp. The second that she withdrew her hand I would awaken, her rhythmic lullaby ending, but I would still pretend to be asleep.”

David Barry

“It was raining stunningly hard, and all the kids, of course, were running around the house naked,” Mrs. Berry said. “David was running with them. Water was just coming down in buckets, and they remembered how it was coming down the gutter, like a faucet. In playing with the

children there was no distraction,” she said. “He was nowhere but right there in the moment, right there.”

Christopher Amoroso wrote a letter to his ten-week-old daughter before he died in the towers. He says, “Sometimes I am overwhelmed by the joy I’ve been given by you and your mother. I want you to know that I consider myself the luckiest man to ever walk the face of the earth. If anything were to happen to me, I could honestly say I’ve known true love and happiness in my life.”

Each one of these obituaries points to something beyond the terror of 9/11. Each one shows us something different, something more, something that the event could not take away from us. The love of the people who died in the towers could not be taken away. The family members who remembered their loved ones in this way demonstrated that terror did not have to have the last word. Terror, with its isolating effects, its painful confusion and despair, could not take away love in the end.

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On the morning of Sunday, September 16th, 2001, ministers found their speech frozen in a number of ways. There were no answers, only questions that could not be answered. People felt isolated from each other, even as we all shared the same pain. Ministers struggled to say something meaningful, when they really wanted to sit with their despair just like everyone else. What did they have to say that could reach into and past the heart of terror? What did they have to say that would pull us toward justice and love after this tragedy that shattered each?

The Rev. Beth Miller said to her congregation, “The thing I am really burning to tell you is that I love you.” She says this, after confessing to her lack of things to say. These words, she says, are the only ones that she can find. Love is the only thing that she can recognize in the wake of the tragedy. “Love,” she says, “is the word in my heart right now.” But it is the right word, the only thing that Miller is absolutely sure of in that moment.

Love.

It is the power of love, she says, “that is within us and that comes to the forefront of our hearts and minds when we most need it, and that reaches out and across incredible barriers to touch others. For this I am so grateful.” Love was the only word, the only force that could be mustered in the face of the tragic silence of 9/11. It emerges from the place of fear and isolation, from pain and sadness, and forces itself beyond the boundaries of our individual worlds and into the worlds of others. It tells us to reach out when we would rather be alone. It pushes us to accepting the care of others when we are most in pain. It binds us as a community.

Some ministers, and this includes Beth Miller, were willing to go one step further and call this force of love “God.” I do not think it is necessary to do so, but it is certainly an option. Love, like God, cannot be controlled by human beings. We cannot force ourselves to love another and we cannot force others to love us. The flow of love pulls us into something that is larger than ourselves. It can emerge out of nothing, even after everything has been taken away. And it can come alive when in the most unlikely moments, binding us together in the face of tragedy and loss. Love is something greater than all of us and yet present in each, whether we choose to name that God or not.

9/11 was not the first or the last time that terror and violence shattered our sense of place in this world. We live in an uncertain world, a world where those that we love can be taken away in the blink of an eye. A world with bombs, hijacked planes, smoldering buildings, and broken lives. This is why, I believe, it is so important in our going to remember that violence does not have to have the last word. I suggest that we give that word to love.