

**Exodus 14: 19-31**  
**Matthew 18: 21-35**  
**September 11, 2011**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

This morning I come before you in a state of inner conflict. Like you, I am a citizen of the United States of America—a country I love. I feel profoundly grateful that through the accident of birth I was born here. Like you I deeply believe in the virtues expressed in our Bill of rights and Constitution. And I honor the men and women of our nation who have given their lives to protect the freedom that, sadly, we so take for granted.

And so it is that on this day I am reliving the terrible events of ten years ago. I do not need to turn on the television to see the jets gracefully and horribly slicing into the towers of the World Trade Center. It is and will always be impressed in my mind: a slow motion catastrophe that, no matter how many times I replay it in my mind I will try and fail to prevent. But to me, as dramatic and horrifying as that image is and as tragic was the loss of life and the awful fear instilled in those who were in the towers at the time, or in the airplanes, or on the ground as firefighters—and let us not forget those who died as their plane smashed into the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania—*as terrible as all this was and is, for me there was something worse.*

This was an ordinary day. It was the beginning of a school year. Children got on busses expecting to see their parents at the end of the day. People went to work. Some kissed their loved ones as they left. Some did not. Some left in peace; some in conflict. Ordinary people on an ordinary day all with the expectation that they would be returning home—if to the comfort of a healthy family life, then with anticipation; if to a strained or broken relationship, then with resignation and dread. Some looked forward to dinner with a friend or a quiet evening with a book or television show. Some sadly anticipated another night of loneliness. Those who waited

patiently as their rows were called for the boringly routine domestic flights boarded their planes and endured the run through of the safety procedures never suspecting that on this day they would be woefully inadequate.

To me it is this violation of the ordinary that reveals the evil of the events of this day. Yes on any given day you and I might die in an accident or a natural disaster or have a heart attack or stroke. But these things are part of life. They are sad and sometimes tragic. But most of us have room in our souls to allow for such unfortunate events.

But this was different. An ordinary day involves a deep level of trust that for better or worse it will be just that, an ordinary day which will in turn be followed by another ordinary day. We in the religion business often rail against how we take this life for granted. We exhort our faithful to smell the roses, notice the shadows of the trees and to feel the wind on our faces. We plead with God to open eyes to see the people we love and who love us and to scour off the layers of habit so that we actually see and appreciate the people around us. Yet it is the basic reliability of the ordinary that forms the back drop for the particularity, the preciousness of the individual moment. And when this fundamental trust in the reliability of the ordinary is violated we experience true terror which lasts far beyond the event itself.

What makes the events of ten years ago so traumatic is that these were not acts of random chance. They were carefully planned years in advance. They took into account the fact that a free nation is built on trust. For without trust there is no society. They counted on our having a blind side and they took full advantage of it. This for me is the source of outrage. It is the cold and heartless abuse of trust with the equally cold satisfaction of inflicting pain that represents the true evil of what happened ten years ago.

And yet, as I said I come to you in a state of inner conflict. For as much as I deplore and am appalled by the violation that occurred, I am saddened and disturbed by our response. Rather than see this as a world tragedy we have taken it personally and acted in a spirit of revenge. We have become obsessed with national security, knowing full well that no amount of technology or body searches can be completely successful in preventing random acts of terrorist violence. We have grown suspicious of the stranger among us, particularly our Muslim sisters and brothers, painting them with the same brush as the fundamentalist extremists who, sadly, exist on the fringes of all religions and political ideologies. We have spent billions of dollars in wars which have killed thousands of our own women and men and tens—maybe hundreds-- of thousands of people in Iraq and Afghanistan. Does this response truly represent the best self of our country? Has it accomplished our objectives? Maybe some. But has the benefit been worth the cost? Might there have been another response? Might we yet chart a different course?

I do not propose an answer here. I am one citizen seeking to find some ground upon which to stand. To be honest, I do not believe there is an answer in political approaches. I cannot judge those who were in leadership at the time or who are in leadership now. Instead I turn to the resources of my faith in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as presented in the sacred scriptures. And it is here that I do find ground; however it is very different ground than that offered by national citizenship.

You may be surprised to know that I did not pick these scriptures. They are part of the three year cycle of readings which we share with many Christian denominations. The scriptures are thus coincidental—but what a coincidence!

From the book of Exodus we hear of God's deliverance of Israel from the pursuit of Pharaoh's army by the shores of the Red Sea. The relevant fact here is that this is *God's*

*deliverance*. The Israelites were helpless and thus it was clear that it was God who delivered them in their time of distress. In the anthem the choir sang that was composed in response to the events of ten years ago we hear a plea for God to respond. This is truly the biblical response. When God delivers Israel he does not do so by organizing them into a powerful army. They remain helpless and vulnerable. They get to see the mighty hand of God protect them. Thus they discover that by faith and trust in God they are safe. In the present circumstances is our employment of massive military force in fact God acting for us? I wonder.

Then we hear the response of Jesus to Peter's question, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" The word "forgive" means to release beyond hope of recovery. Related to forgive is the word "forget." Forget comes from a Germanic root which means to give away without expectation of return. Clearly the two words are closely related. Both involve an intention to release as a naturalist might return an animal to the wild with no expectation of seeing it again. Last year we explored the meaning of forgiveness and discovered that whatever else the word may imply, it does *not* mean approving or condoning hurtful behavior. It does *not* mean excusing violence and abuse. It does *not* mean pretending nothing happened. It certainly is not meant to be a way of preventing further violence.

Instead, forgiveness recognizes a two way relationship between the one who is injured and the one who has inflicted the injury. The act of forgiveness is intended to bring healing to both the one who has caused hurt and the one who has been injured. For the hard reality is this: to the extent that I do not enter on the journey of forgiveness is the extent to which I continue to suffer. Holding on to the pain means I continue to carry it. Therefore the wounds remain present and bleeding as if they had just occurred. That is why Jesus tells Peter that there is no numerical limit to forgiveness. To fail to seek the grace to be willing to forgive is to condemn oneself to

carry the scars and the trauma. It is to remain in exile from the state of ordinary life which existed before the offense.

That is why I am disturbed by the phrase, “never forget.” I am not disturbed by the idea of remembering with compassion the events of ten years ago. Compassion breeds empathy and a desire to bring healing to pain. It is what we are at our best in this country as thousands of citizens respond to our neighbors devastated by flooding. As a whole we are a generous and caring people.

But the phrase “never forget” with its meaning “never let go” is to me a spiritually dangerous attitude and one which directly contradicts the teachings and life of Jesus who modeled the exact opposite moral and spiritual path. For to the extent to which we “never forget” we never move beyond. To the extent that we never forget, we continue to live in the trauma and the outrage and the desire for revenge. To the extent that we never forget we remain in exile from the wonder and delight of the ordinary which is so precious and so sacred and so packed with God.

Friends, this morning please hear my wrestling and my struggle to find my place in the powerful and, for me, confusing emotions of this day. I speak this way in hopes that if you too are seeking to find your place as a citizen and as a disciple of Jesus you may be led in some small way to a firm place to stand. Amen.