



Date: September 11, 2016

Title: "A Nation in Pain," "Payback Time",

Scripture: Psalm 56; Psalm 58:3-11

Description: Each of the three brief sermons begins with material I preached on that first Sunday after 9/11 in 2001. I then add a few reflections on that material fifteen years later.

Part 1

It was the week we stood in front of scenes of destruction with our burning eyes and our dry throats. And we looked at it. Over and over, we just looked at it. There was no making it go away.

At first we wanted the theater lights to go up, the credits to roll, so we could walk into the lobby, suggesting Starbucks on the way home. But it wasn't a sci-fi movie, it did not go away.

What happened? What kind of world was this that the innocent die? Where was God's hand, that it did not stop the killing? How long would God watch while the world called our God names? Will the guilty laugh cruelly in some remote corner of the world while the innocent lie cold in the rubble?

The bolts of pain tore our lives in two. Our tears still well up inside us whenever we see again the horrible scenes now imprinted in our minds and in our history forever.

The next spring, as we began to celebrate Holy Week, we would recall that this was not the first time. Like an airliner hammering into glass and steel, the nails hammered into human hands and feet that dark Friday outside Jerusalem in the spring of AD 33. Those bright, shining Towers, who rose above us all, crashed down amid cries of pain and anguish. That bright, shining One, who was the epitome of beauty and accomplishment, now become the picture of horrible tragedy. Our sons and daughters, crying for help amidst the rubble and smoke; the Son of God dying young, before his ministry had reached its potential.

God understands what we experienced on that awful morning of 9/11, or of any morning that begins the worst day of our life. Where is God in the face of our pain? God is alongside us, shedding tears among us, the heart of God beating with our hearts in pain and sorrow. For God has been there. God understands suffering, especially the cruel, unjust suffering of the innocent.

What has happened with our pain since that first 9/11, the year that changed life forever. Deep hurt always changes us, often permanently. Hurt like that can make us angry, bitter, harder. It can turn a beating heart to stone. Or hurt can soften us, teach us, make us wiser and more aware of the suffering of other people.

Though we would never choose it, never choose to repeat it, that hurt can make us more human than we ever could have been without it.

What has that hurt on 9/11 done to our nation? What effect on our country? That's the question we'll want to discuss over lunch today. *But it is not the important question.* The truly important question is this: what effect has it had on you?

That question remains to be fully answered.

PART 2: PAY-BACK TIME!

Soon and very soon, the initial feelings of shock and fear were replaced by a burning fury, a desire to lash out and punish. They weren't very nice feelings for Christians, but we didn't feel very nice then. If being Christian means always being calm and gentle and mild, then we'll set aside being Christian for a while as we hunt down those murderers and bring them to justice.

"Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime" was one of the scripture verses we read in worship that Sunday. (Psalm 58:8) We remembered that the yearning for revenge is in the Bible. Without embarrassment and without apology, our Bible contains prayers that ask for vengeance on those who have harmed us. The desire to retaliate and to inflict punishment is not forbidden; it is real and it is part of being human. Our faith does not have to hide from that.

Scripture shows that, instead of covering it up in the name of "nice" speaking the anger we feel is cathartic. And the feeling of rage gives power to the hurt. It helps us name the depth and intensity to the evil that has been afflicted on us. When a fly buzzes around my face, I am annoyed. When I am stung by a nest of yellow jackets, I am hurt! When we are caught in traffic, we're irritated; when we were attacked and innocent people were murdered, we were outraged. There's a difference, and rage helps us respect the difference.

That does not mean that retaliation is the solution. The words of the Vengeance Psalms are just that—words, they are not action. There is a real difference between the words, "I hope you..." and the action of swinging a fist or pulling a trigger. There's a difference between beating your fists on your steering wheel and jumping out of the car at the next light to beat on the other driver! The words of the Psalms are spoken to God, not directly to the enemy. Vengeance is entrusted to God. The desire for vengeance is fully recognized, fully owned, fully expressed...and fully turned over to God. "Vengeance is mine' says the Lord. 'I will repay.'"

There is a way beyond the desire for revenge, but it is a way *through* that desire, not around it. Our rage and indignation can be fully expressed, because evil and injustice must be recognized for what they really are. The attacks on 9/11 were not just a misunderstanding, they were dreadful acts of evil. It was right for us to be filled with indignation.

Eventually, somehow, our rage must be yielded to the mercy of God. Not by denying it, or by willing it to go away, but by feeling it, living with it, letting it affect us, and teach us and empower us. Then by giving it to God, who will achieve

justice on our behalf. As a nation, as citizens of this nation, as followers of the Prince of Peace, we have a long way to go.

CHANGED FOREVER

Somehow, Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001 feels like the fulcrum on which our world changed forever. Four months earlier, in May that year, traveling in New York, I was separated from my wallet. Suddenly I was without cash, credit cards, and identification. A friend gave me \$20 and directions for transportation to the airport. That afternoon I talked myself onto my Delta flight home with nothing but my good looks and the assertion that I had a reservation on the 3:30 flight, and was a minister. Try doing that these days!

The world has changed so much since September, 2001.

Since 9/11, we have seen that the systems of our society do not work. At least, not well. They work only to a very limited extent. We have seen that reality, but we have not yet acknowledged it.

(By "systems" I mean large-scale entities such as the government, the economy, health-care, and education, to name examples.) Systems are designed to serve, to benefit. They exist to cure. But human life is not curable. Our biggest problems have no solutions. They are mysteries. We can learn to live with them, endure them, and often learn and grow from them, but not solve them. Even faith will not make life's problems disappear.

Systems maintain power by promising solutions and protection that will take uncertainty out of the future. This is a false promise. They dangle more than they can deliver. *The more important dimensions of being human have no clear answer.* Because these dimensions are not met by answers but by relationships. The fundamental illusion is that better politics and better management can essentially eliminate fallibility, and thus 'fix' our human condition.

Systems are good for making automobiles and computers and fighting wars. They also make money. Systems do this by taking a human condition (such as aging), describe it as a problem ("Put an end to aging spots and sore joints!") , and then sell a purported solution ("Try our product for a 30-day, money-back guarantee!").

Doing-for has replaced being-with as a basic approach to living. Production has replaced presence.

Two results since 2001:

1) The systems are doomed to fail us. They promise what they cannot deliver. Because they cannot keep us healthy, safe, and prosperous, we have all become more skeptical and cynical. We keep calling for more control and accountability. We have growing distrust of government, education, physicians, and services of all shapes and sizes. When was the last time you believed the voice that said, "Your call is important to us..."?

The government cannot make us safe. Only a circle of friends can assure us that when something bad happens, we will not be abandoned. No health care system can prevent disease or death. Only a caring circle of neighbors can visit us when we are ill, stand by us as we recover, and care for us if we do not recover.

No educational system (or search engine) can teach us all we need to know. It takes a village, sharing the experience of each, to impart wisdom.

2) We citizens have grown rusty from not doing what only we ourselves can do. Our community skills are weak from lack of use. We have grown much more skilled at being individuals than at relating to one another meaningfully.

To address disasters, even disasters as violent and senseless as the attacks of 9/11 or as enormous as the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, here are the elements we need: kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness, acceptance of vulnerability, and mystery. No military forces, no FEMA, no health care plan can provide those things. I'm not saying let's abolish those institutions; but let's do recognize their limitations.

Pick a person we care about. Let's pick Hyoun Joo. If you're Hyoun Joo's enemy, please raise your hand. We all love Hyoun Joo. What if we get word that Hyoun Joo's house burned down. (This is totally fictitious; I'm completely making it up.) We also heard that the fire department arrived quickly and extinguished the blaze; they performed their task well. So she doesn't need any of us to stand with her in her front yard and weep over the ashes that remain. You good with that? Hyoun Joo and her husband have comprehensive insurance coverage. The insurance policy will repay her expenses, so she doesn't need any of us to deliver a care meal. Don't bother. (Although this story is fictitious, Hyoun Joo says that she'll be happy to accept any care meals you'd like to provide anyway!) She's a bit stressed right now, but her physician (who is a provider in her health care policy) prescribed Zanex. so she'll be fine, no need for us to call. We won't have to phone Hyoun Joo to ask if there's anything we can do or offer her a hug or say a prayer for her, because she is well covered, right?

She is totally well-covered, but she is not yet cared for. Only a community of loving relationships can provide that care. And I am saying that being cared for is our fundamental need. Without that, everything else is a sham. When we are cared for, struggles and difficulties become opportunities for caring to grow and increase. The terrible home fire is not only a disaster, but also a blessing to Hyoun Joo, who never knew just how much she is loved here; Hyoun Joo's fire also blesses us, who didn't realize how much power we have by simply offering our love.

Let's get out and vote this November, because democracy is America's gift to history. Let's work hard to be productive, because a healthy economy is far better than a weak economy. But let's remember that none of those things will make us better human beings, because humanness is found in being human together. And the gift of life is discovered through love in the name of the one who gave us life as a gift to be enjoyed, not a problem to be solved. Amen.

