

Don't Do It For God's Sake

A Response to 9-11

Jeremiah 29:4-13; Ephesians 3:14-21

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Spring Lake, Michigan
September 16, 2001

Transcription of the spoken sermon

*Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironical points of light
Flash out wherever the just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.*
W. H. Auden

I am aware that this week, while I was away, good things were happening in this community. I always tell Peter Theune that when I am not here, it's up to him, and he with the team, has had created for this community and the broader community a significant week. Part of the celebration were the four candles behind me that were symbols of those sites of devastation, and this morning we lighted, as well, the paschal candle as a sign of our remembrance of those who moved from life through death into eternal life. I want to express my appreciation to the team for the fine way that all of you in significant numbers have been here.

The lines of W. H. Auden's poem that so powerfully catch the mood and spirit of our day were written September 1, 1939. Auden attended the theater and I believe the Yorktown section of New York City that was heavily populated with German people. He attended the theater and, in the midst of the showing, as was the custom at that time, there was a newsreel that showed the Nazi invasion of Poland, and when that news came on, the theater erupted in shouts of triumph and applause. W. H. Auden left the theater thoroughly shaken at what he had just experienced, that eruption of emotion and elation at the forthcoming devastation that was wreaked by Hitler and his troops on the European

continent. It so shook him concerning human nature, that he began a spiritual pilgrimage that led him eventually to Christian faith.

Indeed. We, too, are in a time when suddenly we become aware of that potential for evil that is part and parcel of our human condition.

The sermon subject this morning is titled, "Don't Do It For God's Sake." It was intended to be a word spoken particularly to parents and to this community about being serious about the nurture and the traditioning of our children, for this is opening Sunday and I am well aware of the fact that parents today face tremendous tensions and pressures. There is such a competition for the time and the energy of our children and our youth. So many good things to do, so many difficult choices to make, and the sermon was going to be, "Don't do it for God's sake," for God doesn't need our children to be nurtured, but do it for our sake. Do it for the sake of our children and our youth, and for the sake of their future.

I was going to put in a good word, not in the typical fashion of church where it is for God's honor and God's glory and God's demand and God's requirement -I was simply going to say to you, "Don't do it for God's sake. Do it for your sake. And for the sake of your children." And then, of course, everything changed and I was in touch with the office throughout the week and we made obviously some liturgical alterations, but I thought that title can stand, with a bit of a different twist. I would still speak to you this morning for just a few moments under the title, "Don't Do It For God's Sake."

Don't do what for God's sake? Don't build human community for God's sake. Do it for our sake and for the sake of the future of humanity. Don't be serious about religious faith and vision that moves toward love and peace for God's sake, but for our own sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of the possibility of a human and humane future.

Were you shocked at the darkness that erupted this week? Really, on reflection, you ought not to have been. For if we are traditioned in the biblical story which arises out of Israel's faith and finds expression in the faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, then you would know that what has happened is that which is always possible and always potentially on the horizon of the human situation. Whether you take the story in Genesis 3 of the Fall, or whether, as I have suggested, we write some new story that is more consistent with our knowledge of the human situation, it doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter the story we tell.

It is the fact, the message, the reality to which the biblical story points, and our human experience has confirmed. The great church father and theologian, St. Augustine, created the doctrine of Original Sin, and Original Sin was simply an attempt to express that which is commonly true, that all of us are tainted with that inward corruption that makes us always potentially on the threshold of some fresh expression of the darkness. This is not a problem of a particular ethnic group or racial group or religious tradition. This is the human condition. We are

born in sin, says the Psalmist, the human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, says the prophet. And in those early stories of Genesis, God repents that he's ever created this human creature, given the darkness that emerges from his behavior. No, we need not be shocked at what we have experienced, nor can we separate ourselves from it, for it is the universal human condition.

You may say, "Ah, but this was something special. This was something different," and I would say, "Dear friends, just look at our own history." I have not time this morning to document it all for you, but let me simply remind you of Crusades in which Christian forces put the Muslim to the sword until the blood ran thick in the streets of Jerusalem. I have only to mention the word Inquisition to remind you of that demand to deny one's native faith in order to confess Jesus or to be burned at the stake. I have only to remind you that in the experience of some of us who are older here, in our own lifetime, this world has seen the annihilation of six million Jews perpetrated by a darkness that emerged amidst a people most cultured, most educated and most Christianized in Western civilization. It is not a matter of Islam. It is not a matter of Christianity or Judaism. It is a human manifestation of darkness that is ever hovering in the wings the moment there are those who become so obsessed with hate, anger, that they are willing to perpetrate the holocaust of devastation.

We might ask the question, "What drives people to that kind of hatred?" I think we have to distinguish here between the leadership of those who follow and are recruited into this cruel business, leaders with calculating brilliance and full resource, implementing this attack with devastating efficiency. Those who realize a potential within all of us to become evil incarnate, and then they, in their wake, gathering others who have nothing to lose, who need a cause, who need some call to nobility with some promise of eternal reward, and wherever there is a world where there are masses of such people, there is a potential for demonic leadership to manipulate them and to move them to the kind of darkness that we have experienced in this week past.

It ought not to shock us, but it ought to cause us to raise the question - What is there in our world that would create the context for that kind of hatred, anger, and violence? I could play for you the tape of the sermon of July 1 of this past summer, "Beyond Nation, Ethnicity and Creed," in which I suggested at that time that it was not really wise for us to be seeking to build a missile defense system against some nuclear bomb of a rogue nation, but that we might better sit down with those rogue nations and ask them, "What are your fears? What are your hopes and your dreams? How can we, the world's one super power, with seemingly limitless resource and giftedness, what can we do in order to bring you into a global community in which we can dwell together in peace and harmony?"

It is incumbent upon us at a time like this to search our own souls and not miss the symbolic value of the targets that were struck. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the symbols of our wealth and of our military might by which in self-serving interest, we perpetuate a world in which we can continue to enjoy the ascendancy. Those are the questions that we need to ask ourselves.

And how are we to respond?

With great care. We are not different than any other people. We stand in solidarity with the world's darkness; we carry within us in our own hearts the seeds of potential violence, but we have been nurtured in a tradition that has taught us that the only hope of the world is the breaking of the cycle of violence. Hate begets hate. Violence begets violence. And if we haven't learned the lesson by now, then certainly it is time for us to think again. We have heard calls for retaliation and revenge. We all, being human, feel the anger. We experience the emotion of needing to respond. Not so long ago, I saw the film, *Pearl Harbor*, and reliving that day of infamy, I remembered as I saw the Japanese pilots climbing into their Zero planes on the aircraft carrier, I remembered as a child at school how with our doodling we would make pictures, war pictures, tanks and planes, how the P-38s and our Mustangs would shoot down those Japanese Zeroes, and as I saw in the film and relived again the emotion I felt as a child, I hated the Japs! The enemy was demonized. And even now, we can so easily fall into that trap, the consequence of which would simply escalate the cycle of violence one more time. And in this world, with the technology and the weaponry that is available in this world, if we don't break the cycle of violence, we will destroy ourselves.

The rhetoric has to cease. Tell me how a Christian television evangelist named Jerry Falwell, speaking on the TV evangelist program of Pat Robertson, can point the finger at liberal civil rights groups and abortionists and gay and lesbian people and say that all such are partially responsible for this devastation? Don't they know that it was the anti-Semitic, hateful, anti-Jewish rhetoric of a Martin Luther, no less, that flowered into the Holocaust? Don't we realize, at least in the Christian Church that, unless we are touched by the gospel and the grace of God so that we do not react naturally, we will become the instruments and the agents of that movement that will cut out the possibility of a human and humane future? Don't we know, don't we really know that it is finally, only in the acknowledgment of our own involvement in the human situation and the responsible response to that situation by which the world can be changed?

A friend called me last evening, and I said to him, "If you were preaching tomorrow, what would you preach?" He said, "I'd preach on anger." And then he said to me, "I am just amazed at how little the gospel has really sunk into us." And he spoke of a friend with whom he enjoys a conversation, cultured, educated, Christian, intelligent, who said, "We should round all the Islamic people up and

ship them out," reminding me of what we did during the wake of Pearl Harbor when we incarcerated Japanese Americans, doing a terrible injustice.

Dear friends, we do not have the luxury of responding according to our own animal nature. The cycle of violence must stop here. Not that we do not take responsible action to root out that which threatens not only this nation, but the whole of civilization. But, it is the function of good religion to enable us to transcend those native responses and that is why we need a community like this. That really is what our struggle has been all about. That is why we need to do it, not for God's sake, but for our own sake. We cannot bring shalom to the earth, we cannot bring in the kingdom of God universal, but this we can do - we can love one another. We can act with compassion. We can seek justice. We can love mercy, and we can walk humbly with God, arm in arm together. That is why we need each other. That is why we need a faith community that will lift us, enable us, who are part and parcel of the human scene, who in solidarity with all of those across the globe would enable us to transcend our anger, and to be spared the violence that will simply keep the trauma moving toward the darkness and final doom.

One of the great things about the biblical tradition is the prophetic voice that called upon the people of Israel to be self-critical. The prophets called Israel to awareness of sin and corruption in their society. They were relentless in their critique of the self-satisfied religious and political institutions. Jeremiah's famous temple sermon in the seventh chapter condemned the presumption of a hollow religious practice that failed to do justice and love mercy. At the Temple, he cried out,

Do not trust in these deceptive words, "This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord."

Jeremiah excoriated the people of Judah for their lack of compassion and mercy and justice, and the judgment that he promised came sure as his word, and Babylon moved in and Jerusalem was devastated and the exiles were moved off into Babylon and there there were voices of unrest. There were other voices there counseling the exiles not to settle down, for surely they would soon be delivered. But, Jeremiah wrote a letter saying, do not listen to these voices. You will be there for a long time. Settle in. Build houses, plant gardens, and pray for Babylon's welfare. And then, beautifully, this prophet whose stern warning had been unheeded but whose word had become reality gave this wonderful word of hope and comfort:

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans of good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah's God was the Lord of history who moved the nations in direct, determining fashion. I no longer can conceive of God as the one who controls the movement of history in such direct fashion, but I do believe that the grain of the

universe moved by the Creator Spirit beckons to life and a hopeful future realized in loving community.

It is to that beckoning Spirit that I point you, to respond to the lure of love believing God's intention is to give us a future and a hope.

Television coverage this past week has been full of stories of heroism, of kindness and gentleness, of the compassion of so many who have given of themselves and some giving their lives in their effort to save others. Such dark times reveal not only the worst, but the best of the human spirit. And in those stories we see the hope and possibility of a future of human well-being.

We cannot effect the kingdom of God nor the condition of universal shalom by ourselves. But, we can ensure that its small beginning is tasted here - concretely, in this loving community as we embrace one another, care one for another, and together create here a free and gracious place for all who would abide in love and peace.

We do it not for God's sake, but for our own sake, and the sake of a human and humane future - surely the Divine intention.