

A NEVER AGAIN WORLD

Preached by the Rev'd Grace Burton-Edwards on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 September 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:1-13, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35.

Most folks over the age of 13 remember where they were and what they were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001. I had just pulled into the parking lot of First United Methodist Church in Anderson, where I worked, when I heard the report on the radio. We usually had staff meetings on Tuesday mornings, but the normal plans were cast aside as we began to think as a church staff about how to respond. We quickly realized that we would need to plan prayer services and then memorial services. That evening our church was fairly full.

The tragedy touched most people in some fairly direct way. Our prayer lists became very long and remained so. Almost everyone, it seems, knew someone who was a victim of the tragedy or a close relative of a victim or who knew someone who was in New York or DC. Almost everyone knows someone who was stranded in some part of the country or the world when air travel was canceled. Almost everyone has sent a loved one to serve in the wars that followed this event.

There have been other tragedies since then. Devastating hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes killed far more people and caused greater physical damage. But this suffering was poignant because it was not a random act of nature. It was a calculated act of violence carried out by a few individuals who intended even greater suffering than they caused.

A mantra that entered the nation's lexicon was the phrase – Never Again, or sometimes Never Forget Never Again. We directed our military policy, foreign policy, homeland security strategy, even airport security screening toward identifying potential terrorists, monitoring threats, increasing vigilance, in the hope that we might somehow prevent those who wished to harm us from doing so. Never Forget, Never Again.

The irony, of course, is that the phrase Never Again was a borrowed phrase. It emerged in the world's reaction to the Holocaust. When we discovered what hate had done, the global community vowed not to let that kind of suffering happen again. And yet it endured. Despite our vows and our efforts, the world suffered genocide and ethnic violence and tribalism and oppression. We became victims of a similar kind of hate on 9/11,

In some ways, our vigilance has worked. I don't know if anyone who lived through that day will ever feel innocently safe again. But so far we have succeeded in avoiding a massive attack like the coordinated effort that occurred on September 11. I invite us this day, however, to think about that phrase, Never Again, in a different way, in what I believe is a gospel way. What must we do to ensure not just that we never again become victims but that we never again live in a world where this kind of harm exists? What can we do to participate in a world that is more in keeping with God's vision? What can we do to create a Never Again world?

The scripture texts for this day give us a glimpse of the reality we wish to see. I did not choose these texts. They are assigned for this day as part of a three year cycle of scripture readings called the Revised Common Lectionary developed by a group called the Consultation on Common Texts. Some of you know that my husband is a member of that group. For the record, I asked him if they played with the lectionary a bit so that we would hear these words this day. He reported that no, they did not arrange the texts so that the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 19 would fall on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. We have the same texts on this day since 1992. It just happened this way.

But today, how gracious it is for us to hear this vision that points to a Never Again world. Look first at the epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul writes of embracing tolerance for different religious practices. One issue then was whether Christians should eat food that had been offered to idols. Some faithful Christians, especially those from a Jewish background, avoided meat because it was difficult in the markets to tell if meat had been used in religious rituals. It was safer, they thought, to avoid meat entirely. Other faithful Christians did not share those concerns. The issue had become a point of division, with both groups telling each other what they ought to be doing.

In response, Paul said that everything we do should be done to honor God. If avoiding meat helps you honor God, then avoid it. But he went on to say that we should not pass judgment on those who honor God in ways that differ from our own. We are each accountable to God individually. It is not our place to pass judgment on our neighbors.

To be fair, Paul had conflict within the Christian community in mind when he wrote these words. But his advice to the Roman church helps us think today about how to live in that Never Again world, a world free of religious violence. His vision of tolerance of differences in practice holds true today. We are called to respect the religious practices of our neighbors, even if we don't share them.

Then Jesus speaks to us this day of the necessity of forgiveness. Peter, the future rock of the church, asked Jesus how many times he must forgive. He probably thought he was being generous when he suggested seven times. Jesus, however, said try seventy-seven, or according to other ancient manuscripts seventy times seven. In other words, your forgiveness must be without limit.

This is a difficult word for us to hear on this day. Many of us are not ready even to think about forgiving the terrorists who caused such great harm, and frankly we may never be. We want them to be brought to justice, and that is appropriate. The wounds of that day and the ongoing pain of the attacks are still raw for many of us.

But I remind us all that forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things. Reconciliation happens when both parties sit together and talk through the wrong that occurred so that peace can happen. Reconciliation requires safety and freedom from threat. We are not reconciled with terrorism and we do not need to be. But though we are not reconciled, we can yet practice forgiveness.

Nearly ten years ago, many of our nation's faith leaders signed a statement in response to the acts of 9/11. They said then, "We share the deep anger toward those who so callously and massively destroy innocent lives, no matter what the grievances or injustices invoked. In the name of God, we too demand that those responsible for these utterly evil acts be found and brought to justice. Those culpable must not escape accountability. But we must not, out of anger and vengeance, indiscriminately retaliate in ways that bring on even more loss of innocent life." That is forgiveness, even without reconciliation. Forgiveness does not deny justice. But forgiveness does limit vengeance. Forgiveness practices restraint. Forgiveness makes decisions about the future based on the present, not on the past. Forgiveness is part of the Never Again world.

Then Joseph models forgiveness and reconciliation for us in the passage from Genesis. After testing his brothers to see that they have not harmed their younger brother Benjamin, he chooses to do no further harm to the brothers who once threw him into the pit. And he confesses with the voice of faith that God has turned the evil they did to him into something good.

Joseph did not pretend that the evil had not happened. What his brothers did to him was wrong. Yet through that bitter experience God worked good. As we gather almost ten years to the hour after the most devastating terrorist attacks in our nation's history, we too are aware of God's grace to us in the midst of our pain. We remember the heroism and courage we witnessed in so many. We are grateful for our nation's resilience. We are aware of how 9/11 shaped our values, made us consider what is really important. I am not saying that 9/11 was a gift in any way and yet in the midst of this tragedy that shook us to the core, we found God faithful.

Tolerance, forgiveness, trust – these are gifts of the Never Again world.

As we think about how to get there, how to get to that Never Again world, I want to share some thoughts from a writer I've come to respect greatly in the last year – Eboo Patel. Several folks from our congregation heard him speak at the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes gathering in February. Patel is an American Muslim. His family is from India, but he grew up in Glen Ellyn, Illinois outside Chicago. His book *Acts of Faith* describes his spiritual journey – renouncing the faith of his parents for a time, exploring Judaism with a girl friend, living in Christian community at a Catholic Worker House, and finally returning to the Ismaili Muslim faith of his past.

Largely because of his own interfaith background, Patel got involved with interfaith work. He noticed that there were very few young people at interfaith gatherings across the country, so he and a few others developed the Interfaith Youth Corps, an organization that brings high school and college age young people from different religious traditions together to do community service. By working together to address needs in their communities, they develop relationships with each other. Along the way, the program invites them to reflect on what they experience together through the lens of their faith traditions. The goal is to create understanding through shared service and reflection.

Patel was in the middle of starting the Interfaith Youth Corps when 9/11 occurred. In his book, he makes the interesting point that all of the 9/11 terrorists started out as fairly ordinary young

people. They were not from extremist backgrounds. They were actively recruited by religious extremists who preyed on the idealism of youth. He goes on to describe and cite examples of similar patterns of recruitment and grooming of young people by religious extremists in Christian, Jewish, and Hindu traditions as well. He looks back on his own adolescence and sees how he might easily have fallen under the influence of dangerous forces who target young people. Then he writes, “Many mainstream religious institutions ignore young people or, worse, think that their role should be limited to designing the annual T-shirt. By contrast, religious extremists build their institutions around the desire of young people to have a clear identity and make an impact.”

Patel calls mainstream religions, moderate and open people of faith like you and me, people who practice tolerance and forgiveness and trust, to be just as aggressive in recruiting and forming young people in the practices of faith as religious extremists can be.

And so I say with confidence that what we do here at Trinity Church is crucial for the world's future. We are a training ground for a Never Again world. Let me highlight three ways this is true.

1) We reach out to young people. You already know that we offer some of the strongest ministries for children and youth in our diocese. We also created St. Richard's Episcopal School which has nurtured thousands of young people in its 51 year history. Care for the next generation is at the heart of our mission and practice. We are intentional about forming young people.

2) We are also intentional about forming adults in a *reasonable* faith. In the Episcopal Church we like to speak of a three-legged stool on which our faith sits – scripture, tradition, and reason. It is the embrace of scripture and tradition with reason that keeps us from doing silly, passionate, misguided things in the name of religion. I know that we do not like to proselytize, but frankly the world could use a few more Episcopalians, so invite your friends.

3) We reach out in love to our neighbors. The life we live here is lived not for ourselves alone. We seek to respond to the needs around us so that all people can share in God's vision of shalom.

So it is entirely fitting that our annual fall parish opportunities fair is happening on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. The things we do through this congregation and the way this congregation strengthens us to live throughout the week are part of our contribution to the Never Again world. Let us give thanks for the gifts God gives us in this place and find ways to share these gifts with others. Amen.

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