

# 9-11: A Look Back, A Look Ahead

## *A Reflection on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*

1 John 4: 16b-21  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On Thursday evening of this past week, the quarterly Delegate Assembly of Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry was held here in our Fellowship Hall. The Rev. Ray Hickman, the new Executive Director of TMM, and a former interim pastor here at College Hill, introduced a question for people gathered around individual tables to reflect upon. The question was, "**How did your faith influence your understanding of the events of 9-11? And visa versa, how did the events of 9-11 influence your faith?**"

As people of faith, I think these questions are vitally important for each of us to reflect upon as well, and I encourage you to do so. In doing so myself this past week, I decided to look back at the sermon I preached 10 years ago, when I was serving a congregation in Dallas, which was the Sunday immediately following the terrorist attacks.

That, by the way, is one of the benefits of putting something down in writing, like journaling, because you can look back years later and see what was going on in your heart and mind and spirit at the time.

I reflected that through our common shock and grief, I, like most people, was moved at that time by the initial experience of a deep sense of unity – and not only as Americans, but as the human race across the globe. Today I grieve, however, that **we have not been able to sustain that feeling of unity and oneness as one global family**. In fact, we have reached an almost unbearable sense of divisiveness and polarity in our country. This must deeply grieve the heart of God.

If you would indulge me, I would now like to share with you part of my reflection from that sermon that I preached just 5 days after the tragedy of 9-11. On a few occasions I will pause to interject a comment or two based on where we seem to stand on these issues a decade later.

It is important that you reflect upon the issues that this tragedy is causing you to struggle with. Let me share just three issues, among countless issues, that I, and perhaps many of you, am wrestling with internally.

The first: patriotism vs. nationalism

The second: war vs. peace

The third: what was, is, and will be God's role in all of this?

First, I am afraid of **nationalism**, that spirit that borders on self-righteous and self-serving prejudice that we are somehow more entitled and closer to God's will than all other countries. When we look at the expressions of nationalism by other countries, we often witness acts of hatred and destruction and oppression. We

are really no different in this country. **God does not love Americans more than God loves any other children of God!**

**Yet a true understanding of patriotism is different.** It is more in line with a sense of unity and pride in our country, rather than that sense of superiority and privilege and license to do whatever we can justify. Many Americans are experiencing a sense of patriotism like never before in their lives. Hopefully it will not be so much an act of waving our flag in the face of other nations, as it is **a feeling of support and solidarity and unity of purpose as Americans.**

Let me interject at this point that as was feared, the term 'patriotism' was indeed co-opted, in my opinion, and used as a not-too-veiled sense of nationalism. I hope we can reclaim what it means to be patriotic.

Related to this is recognizing our own enormous diversity. Americans, as we know, are not only those with a European heritage. We are a people with origins in every country in the world, and all the world's religions are represented here. The bigots and fanatics among us have yet to learn that, and the acts of hatred aimed at Arab-Americans and Muslim mosques this week reflect the same intolerance and hatred as those behind the terrorism.

We should take comfort in this week's swift and firm denouncement of every kind of racial and ethnic prejudice. United States Attorney General, John Ashcroft, himself warned, "We must not target others based on race, religion, and ethnic origin... Threats of violence will not be tolerated." **Hopefully, tolerance for others will take on an importance and priority in our American way of life like never before.**

Again I interject, ten years later it doesn't look like tolerance was a lesson learned by many, as exemplified right here in Tulsa just last week when a group from outside the state came to protest the Muslim faith, sharing their hateful message that all of Islam is a radical faith bent on attacking Christianity.

Second, many of us are afraid any time we hear talk of **war**. As worship services and prayer vigils throughout the country this week included prayers for peace, they were accompanied by promises of resolve to fight the war against terrorism.

**Gandhi once said, "An eye for an eye makes the eye go blind." Many of us are struggling with the balance between that truth and the need to free this world from the grip of terrorism, which at this point seems to require military force. And yes, many more innocent people will die.** As we sing in our National Anthem, it looks like we are getting ready for the "rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air."

There was wisdom and guidance in the words of the archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, who stated during a worship service in London on Friday, "Yes, those responsible for such barbaric acts must be held to account, but **we must be guided by higher goals than revenge.**"

A letter was sent this week to every Presbyterian Church in the country. It was signed by the Moderator, the Stated Clerk, and the Chair of Council of the General Assembly. A portion of that letter states, "As [national leaders] seek to find effective and appropriate responses to this terror, it is our prayer that these responses may be of the kind that will contribute to a future of peace, and not serve in a way to escalate the cycle of violence and counter-violence to a higher level. Further, we call our leaders and all people of good will to resist the stereotyping of enemies that so often occurs in these types of situations."

**May we not become a people obsessed with vengeance and retaliation as we pursue much needed justice.**

Another interjection at this point. I'm not too sure that all of our actions as a nation in the past decade didn't overreach the stated goal of seeking justice, and instead delved into the realm of revenge and retaliation. And the war in Afghanistan, as you know, has now become the longest war fought in the history of the United States. I won't even comment on the war in Iraq.

The third issue I want to address this morning is **just what was, is, and will be God's role in all of this?** First of all, unlike certain others, I'm not presumptuous enough to think I know.

Six years ago, after the Oklahoma City bombing, I was horrified, however, when one pastor commented during a nationally televised memorial service, "**Look what God had to do to get our attention.**" I wondered what kind of God this pastor believed in. Some people are obsessed with finding blame. All week long I have been looking out for similar asinine statements concerning our current tragedy. Leave it to **Jerry Falwell** to fill that role. Speaking on the Christian Broadcasting Network's *700 Club*, hosted by the Rev. Pat Robertson, Mr. Falwell said partial blame for Tuesday's tragedy must be placed on liberal civil liberties groups, feminists, homosexuals, and abortion rights supporters.

Quoting Mr. Falwell, "What we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be minuscule if, in fact, God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve." After Robertson agreed with him, Falwell added, "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

The White House, thank goodness, was quick to call the remarks 'inappropriate' and added, "President Bush does not share those views." What scares me, though, is that there are so many in this country that do share those views. I

dearly hope that in the aftermath of this tragedy will come the ability to move beyond such ignorant, prejudiced, and hateful positions.

**And perhaps this is good time for all people, including you and me, to reevaluate our understanding of just who God is, and just what God does and doesn't do.**

Bill Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., compared Falwell's comments with militant Islamic rhetoric. "It trivializes theology. It trivializes the dead," Dr. Leonard said. "It suggests that God was somehow protecting us more than other countries - Britain, Israel - that had terrorist attacks in the past."

In the editorial page of yesterday's *Dallas Morning News* [September 15, 2001], both Falwell and Robertson "drew criticism for remarks that the Sept. 11 attacks may have been God's retribution for evil in the United States or because of the politics of specific groups. **The idea that God would target innocent men and women for the beliefs of others is not sound theology or citizenship at a time when the country is reeling from an assault of hatred.**"

Though impossible to understand why, the facts are simple: tragedy happens, evil happens. God does not target people for tragedy, for God is not a divine terrorist!!

As we are reminded in 1 John 4:16, **God is love**. In every expression of love and sorrow this week, that's where God was, is, and will be!

I will close this sermon as I did 10 years ago, for it continues to reflect my hope for us as people of faith, and for us as a nation.

**It is my prayer that we proceed not with vengeful hatred but with a God-directed balance of love and justice.** And let us struggle through this time together – as a loving community.

So ten years later it is helpful to continue to reflect upon the issues of:

- Patriotism vs. Nationalism
- War vs. Peace
- What was, is, and will be God's role in this – and everything else

Amen.