

A 20-year Look Back at 9-11

1 John 4: 16b-21

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 12, 2012

After a very renewing and relaxing study leave last week, reading an enlightening book on Celtic spirituality, I didn't really want to preach a sermon upon my return reflecting upon the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on 9-11. I chose to not watch the mass amounts news coverage in the past few days, nor watch a number of new documentaries on the subject. **I find that I, perhaps like many of you, am still grieving the losses of that day. And I grieve when reflecting upon where we've come as a nation in the past 20 years as a result of that tragic day.**

So why a sermon on this topic? Because this is College Hill. We are not ones to turn away from that which is difficult, divisive, or painful, especially when it comes to prominent events in the national spotlight.

On that day 20 years ago, I was just arriving at a meeting of Grace Presbytery (when I served a congregation in Dallas). It was an interesting context to be in, surrounded by a large group of Presbyterian pastors and elders, as the news arrived when the towers fell. I preached a sermon on the tragedy the following Sunday. And 10 years ago, in 2011 here at College Hill, I preached a sermon entitled, "9-11: A Look Back, A Look Ahead". In that sermon I began with a question that had recently been posed at a meeting of Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry (TMM) – which happened to be held here at College Hill – by the Rev. Ray Hickman, who was then their new Executive Director, and a former interim pastor here at College Hill. The question was:

- **How did your faith influence your understanding of the events of 9-11?**
- **And vice versa, how did the events of 9-11 influence your faith?"**

As people of faith, I think these questions are important for each of us to continue to reflect upon. In doing so now, I want to update some thoughts from my sermons 20 and 10 years ago. I reflected that through our common shock and grief, I, like most people, was moved at that time **by an initial experience of a deep sense of unity – and not only as Americans, but as the human race across the globe.** Today, however, I grieve 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 polarization in our nation. This must deeply grieve the heart of God.

I addressed **the issue of patriotism vs. nationalism.** Our nation is being infected by **nationalism**, that ideology 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.** I said it then and I'll say it again today: **God does not love Americans more than God loves any other children of God!**

And a true understanding of **patriotism** is very different from what it has morphed into. It is more in line with a sense of unity and pride in our country, rather than that sense of superiority, privilege, and license to do whatever we can justify. **After the**

attacks, most of us probably experienced a sense of patriotism as a feeling of support, solidarity, and unity of purpose as Americans.

It didn't take long, however, for the term 'patriotism' to be co-opted and used as a not-too-veiled sense of nationalism and war mongering. If a person didn't approve of our President's response to 9-11, of invading Afghanistan, then they were labeled as unpatriotic, as if they had the right to define that term. You may remember yard signs and bumper stickers declaring "We Support Our Troops" came with the intentional connection of support for the President and his administration's policies towards war. They claimed that those who didn't support the war weren't supporting our troops on the ground in harm's way. What a lie.

Reclaiming what it truly means to be patriotic will be an uphill battle (pun intended) for a long time to come. When I was in East Texas just last week on that study leave at a Presbyterian camp, I learned that there is a congregation in Tyler called the Patriots Church. After a little research I learned that there is, in fact, a new **nationwide network called the Patriot Church Movement**, with congregations currently in Virginia, Tennessee, Washington, and Texas. And yes, their focus is just what you would expect: **pro-American Christian Nationalism**. And yes, mixed with their understanding of **American superiority, and in reality, white supremacy**, is a healthy dose of far right-wing politics associated with our most recent former president. Their aim, clearly stated on their website, is to take the country back for God, whatever that's supposed to mean.

Many of their followers are also **supporters of the insurrection at our nation's capital on January 6 of this year**. Concerning the ongoing legal ramifications of that event, CNN recently reported:

A federal judge *rejected* the argument that US Capitol rioters held in jail are being prosecuted for their political views and disavowed attempts to downplay the magnitude of the deadly insurrection...

Judge Amy Berman Jackson said of defendant Karl Dresch, "**You called yourself and everyone else patriots, but that's not patriotism. Patriotism is loyalty to country, loyalty to the Constitution, not loyalty to a head of state. That is the tyranny we rejected on July 4.**"

Yes, the patriotism vs. nationalism discussion after 9-11 has become even more problematic in the ensuing 20 years.

In preparing for this sermon today, I found three resources in particular that I'd like to share. The first is from the **Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The Rev. J. Herbert Nelson**, after reflecting upon the events of 9-11 twenty years ago, adds:

Many have paid the price over the past two decades. We are just now seeing the U.S. military pull out of Afghanistan, where the "War on Terror" has concluded, leaving tens of thousands of Afghans, Americans and NATO allies dead.

The human cost in Afghanistan has been staggering, according to statistics gathered by both Harvard and Brown Universities.

- More than 47,000 Afghan citizens

- Nearly 2,500 American service members
- More than 3,800 U.S. contractors
- More than 66,000 Afghan national military and police
- Nearly 450 aid workers
- More than 70 journalists.

If the purpose behind the Sept. 11 attacks was to create cracks in the fabric of our nation, then they have succeeded. Post-9/11 America is a different place. The unity many felt immediately after the attacks has given way to mistrust, racism and divided culture...

The bloodshed and heartache of the past 20 years have taught us that retaliation won't heal wounds or provide shelter for the homeless or food for the hungry. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other denominations and faith groups have invested dollars and people into seeking solutions that don't require guns, grenades, or hate to make a difference...

We talk of humanity and our genuine quest for peace and love, yet our actions speak louder than words...

We must do better. God requires us to do better.

The second resource I'd like to share comes from a post just yesterday from our national **Presbyterian Mission Agency**. It's a pastoral letter sent by the **Rev. Dr. Robert Foltz-Morrison**, executive presbyter of the Presbytery of New York City, to the congregations in that presbytery. His reflection includes the following:

The impact of 9/11/2001 wrought structural and policy changes with the creation of a vast apparatus known as the Department of Homeland Security, passage of the Patriot Act, a War on Terrorism, and this nation's longest engaged warfare in Afghanistan. Surveillance exploded legally and illegally, we saw persecution against Muslims, our borders closed to most immigration into the United States, and an initial successful effort to take over a nation in Central Asia morphed into two decades of efforts to export American democratic and security practices to another part of the world we had largely ignored until September 11, 2001.

At home, we also had been ignoring our own faults and injustices: white supremacist groups grew more emboldened; the killings of Black, Asian, and LGBTQ persons continued by the police and citizens empowered with laws providing them with the right to carry and use weapons; political partisanship became more entrenched; economic, housing, and health inequities grew; climate change wrought vast destructive effects; and, until January 6, 2021, the nation's capital had not been breached by armed persons since the War of 1812. We have not been immune to the ills affecting other nations.

And then he asks, **"Where were the churches throughout these two decades?"** His long answer includes both the good and the bad.

Finally, I want to share something with a bit more hope. Along with about 70 others people from across the country this past Thursday, I participated in a zoom video

gathering led by **Diana Butler Bass**. Many of you will remember her from two years ago when she was the speaker here for our Harold L. Hill Lecture Series. She promoted the event as, "We'll be talking about how 9/11 - those terrible events of 20 years ago - shaped and reshaped our understandings of religion, our personal vocations, and practices of service and ministry." She spoke for about a half hour and then had an equal amount of time for questions and answers.

It was particularly enlightening to me when she got to the hopeful section of her presentation. She talked about **the positive developments in spirituality and theology in the past 20 years**.

- You might want to reflect back to where you were, and College Hill was, theologically and spiritually back in 2001.

Concerning **spirituality**, though never using the terms progressive or Celtic spirituality, she reflected on how so many are **turning to seek the embodiment of the Divine Presence in the world – in creation and other people**. This is the kind of spirituality that links our lives to people of different religious traditions, recognizing that **wisdom comes from all traditions**. Openness to sharing that wisdom through conversations with others has definitely increased in the past 20 years.

She then mentioned how so many congregations have become even **more willing to create a place of hospitality, welcome, and an open table**. A sense of mutual understanding and a shared faith has led many in the past 20 years to recognize and celebrate diversity.

Moving on to **theology**, Diana shared that the past 20 years have been among the most creative in the past 150 years. **We now recognize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to theology that integrates science and the social sciences**. This has led to intentional efforts to include **how we care for the earth and all of creation itself**.

There are also **new voices at the theological table, especially in what is now termed the BIPOC community – which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color**. As a result, new narratives are being developed and shared as **tradition is not so much being rejected as it is being reconfigured**.

Yes, spirituality and theology are coming together in new ways. There is new growth all around us. I would include College Hill in that category, as we have been and will continue to be part of that reconfiguration.

We need to look for that new growth, even as we reflect upon the horrors of 9-11, and many of the current horrors that have grown from that event. For as we are reminded in 1 John 4:16, **God is love**. Therefore, in every expression of love and sorrow, joy and grief, that's where God was, is, and always will be!

Amen.