

**Sermon of April 21, 2013  
Rev. Gary Kowalski  
First Unitarian Church of Worcester**

### **Every Life Is Precious**

**This has been a grueling week.**

**Last Monday, I was two thousand miles away when I heard the news that two bombs had exploded in downtown Boston near the finish line of the marathon. Initial reports said at least two were dead, with dozens critically wounded by the flying shrapnel. I didn't have time to sit by the television or the radio, as many of you must have done, waiting to learn details about the identity of the victims or the search for the perpetrators. I wasn't wondering and worrying, as some of you must have been, whether friends or family members had been caught up in the mayhem. I was distressed and disbelieving that a day which began with such fanfare could end in such pandemonium. But I was also removed. Because I was in Texas, at a minister's retreat, separated by half a continent from the chaos unfolding on Boylston Street and Copley Square, immersed in listening to my colleagues as they shared the ups-and-downs of their lives and the problems they were experiencing in their churches. Maybe that's why the snatches of news that I could grab last week, as the manhunt unfolded, all had a degree of unreality for me. Shock, denial, numbness, a sensation that "this can't really be happening" are common reactions to trauma. But in my case, I'm afraid, it was more a factor of distancing. Even though I'd spent years living right across the Charles, driving a cab in Boston, working at a crisis center in the South End, folkdancing at M.I.T. where a campus policeman was shot, the carnage didn't seem quite convincing. Like so much of what we see and hear on NPR or the Newshour, the events had a faraway feel, not things happening in my community, not on my streets, not to the people I love and care about, but to somebody else not a part of my immediate universe.**

**Of course, the media have a way of connecting us and disconnecting us at the same time. With the internet and CNN we can see and hear scenes of crisis unfolding in real time in Syria, on the other side of the world, while we remain relative strangers to our neighbors next door and ciphers to the people we pass by on the street. The word "communication" comes from a root that means sharing, making common. But while modern communications have enabled us to share more and faster, they've also diluted the depth and meaning of our**

exchange. A study from the University of Wisconsin highlighted the effect in teenage girls. Researchers two years ago took a group of 7 – 12 year old girls and put them into stressful situations, for example, solving math problems in their heads in front of an audience frowning as the youngsters fumbled for answers. Then the girls were allowed to contact their mothers. Some of the girls saw their moms face to face, some talked on the phone, others chatted by text. Afterwards, the kids who'd actually heard their mother's voices showed lower levels of cortisol, a biomarker for stress, and higher levels of oxytocin, a hormone associated with feelings of trust and loving kindness. Those who didn't hear mom's voice, on the other hand, who only texted, were just as anxious as those with no maternal support at all. Instant messaging turned out to be a poor substitute for the comfort of a human presence; it offered no emotional warmth or intimacy, suggesting that we are not only living in an information age, but also in an age of missing information, knowing more and more about realities that can be quantified and crunched as data but knowing less and less about people in their uniqueness, what makes a mother special (for instance), or a daughter loveable in ways that even Google can't track and measure.

College kids today score lower on measures of empathy than they did a generation ago, higher on the scale for narcissism, as though constantly noting each other's whereabouts on Facebook, but not really caring that much. Compassion has been replaced with emoticons. Maybe mass culture is responsible, too, living in crowds where because you can't relate to everybody, you stop relating to anyone at all. But social science sounds like pop psychology when it tries to explain too much: it becomes psychobabble. How do you account for somebody filling a bomb with nails and ball bearings to inflict maximum damage on the innocent? Easy answers fail.

As I tried to make sense of the images flooding our computer and TV screens last week--police cordons, the twisted remnants of pressure cookers, footage of young men in baseball caps caught on surveillance cameras—I wrote in the *Worcester Telegram* that “what is most disturbing about such crimes is their anonymity. Whoever planted these devices managed to erase any recognition that the victims were people with particular names, faces, identities and families. Those killed and wounded had ceased to be ends in themselves and become merely a means to magnifying the urge for destruction.” So I wasn't really surprised when the older of the Tsarnaev brothers who are believed to be the culprits was quoted as saying that he didn't really understand Americans and after several years of living in the United States didn't have a single friend. For Tamerlan Tsarnaev, it didn't matter who he killed, only how many. His targets were faceless and impersonal, and he was isolated and estranged.

**But now we know the identities of the victims, in all their individuality. Lu Lingzi was 23 years old, a Chinese graduate student working on a degree in statistics at Boston University, who loved the rock band Nirvana and really wanted a boyfriend. Martin Richard, a third grader whose family lived in Dorchester, liked riding bikes and basketball; his mother Denise and six-year-old sister Jane were also badly hurt in the blast. Krystle Campbell, age 29, managed a steak house restaurant in Arlington but lived in Medford where she took care of her ailing grandmother, visiting her two or three times a week. Sean Collier, the campus policeman, was just 26, a resident of Somerville, whom students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology remembered as friendly and outgoing, joining the hiking club for winter sports and learning how to swing dance the Lindy. All were incredibly young and none can be replaced. Each of them had a blood type and a favorite food, a shoe size and a secret fantasy, a biography, with hopes and dreams that were not so different than yours or mine, but that were also distinctively their own.**

**We mourn their deaths, and reach out in solidarity to all the maimed and wounded, who easily could have been you or me. It's the nature of such loss to bring us at least momentarily closer, to sensitize us to the fragility of life, to help us understand that each person is precious and beloved. In the face of senseless slaughter we resolve to value and safeguard the sanctity of every human person. We hold our children a little tighter. Remind our partners that we love them a little more earnestly. Hug our friends, show more charity with strangers. But we also recognize that such sentiments need strengthening, because they are constantly undermined by a civilization that distances people: distances them by technology, by class, by race and religion and language and nationality. Already there have been several revenge attacks on Muslims living in our area. Heba Abolaban, a 26 year old mother and physician was pushing a stroller with her baby daughter down a city street in Malden on Thursday, wearing a headscarf, when a man raced at her, balled his fist and punch her hard in the shoulder shouting expletives against Islam. Vandals visited the site of a future mosque planned for Cambridge scrawling graffiti about the "murderous scum bags" who worship there on the walls of the construction zone. It's safe to predict that there will be more assaults of this kind, directed against whole categories of people, so long as racism and sectarian hatred are a part of our world, just as there will be more mindless bombings and terror attacks on American soil. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the second suspect, was finally captured, and the lock down was lifted, shortly before my plane finally landed at Logan on Friday night. But this is not the end. We can all exhale now but not breathe easy. For terrorism will continue just as long as the forces of de-humanization allow us to turn people into objects**

rather than subjects, caricatures and stereotypes and scapegoats rather than people who bleed like us.

So we will continue to confront random violence in our world. But we as religious liberals will face it not with calls for more bomb sniffing dogs and or more check points at the border. We will not counter it with animus against the immigrant or foreigner. We will face it instead as people of faith by committing ourselves to put holes in the fences, by building bridges, by allowing allow the dignity of every person to shine through, by looking into the face of the stranger and the enemy and finding there a mirror reflection of our own. We will face it by knowing and naming God—that sustaining, transforming, and redeeming power that enables life to flourish--as the love that casts out fear, the love that vanquishes hated, the love that makes all men brothers and all women sisters and every child dear.

The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich wrote that “love is life itself in its actual unity. The forms and structures in which love embodies itself are the forms and structures in which life is possible, in which life overcomes its self-destructive forces. And this is the meaning of ethics: the expressions of the ways in which love embodies itself, and life is maintained and saved.”

May ours be an embodied love, a saving faith, an unshakeable determination to resist the principalities and powers that divide the human race and to see a kindred soul in every person that we meet.

I now read the names of those injured in last week’s attack, ranging in age from 5 to 65, most with severe leg wounds.

Kaitlynn Cates

Brittany Loring

Sydney Corcoran

Unidentified male

Liza Cherney

Celeste Corcoran

Kevin Corcoran

Unidentified female

Zhou Danling

Gillian Reny

**Marilyn Kight**

**Erika Brannock-Towson**

**Denise Richard**

**Jane Richard**

**Denise Spenard**

**Heather Abbott**

**Jeff Bauman Jr.**

**Sarah Girouard**

**Beth Roche**

**Lee Ann Gianni**

**J.P. Craven**

**David Yepez**

**John Odom**

**Patrick Downes**

**Jessica Downes**

**Jarrold Clowery**

**Darrel Folkert**

**William White**

**Mary Jo White**

**Kevin White-Bolton**

**Eric Whalley**

**Ann Whalley**

**Roseann Sdoia**

**Aaron Hern**

**Victoria McGrath**

**Nicole Gross**

**Michael Gross**

**We hold all of these in our prayers. May their bodies be healed, and their hearts and minds made whole.**