

*“It’s Who We Are”*

**Sermon of September 12, 2010**

**Rev. Tom Schade at First Unitarian Church of Worcester**

Today is the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, plus one day. The enormity of that day cannot be denied; whether we think about it or not, whether we still get emotional by our memories of that day, we live in the aftermath of that day. In a very real sense, we live in the world that was born that day; the explosions are still thundering echoing and re-echoing, the seemingly solid structures are still collapsing, the dust has not yet settled. A great and wounding trauma has occurred, one that we are all involved in, and this world and this nation are still processing that trauma.

We are all walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and we fear the presence of evil.

I tell the families of the dead that I bury that no one knows how long the process of grief will take; it will take as long as it takes; that grieving stops and starts, seems to go away and then comes back, changes shape and texture and feeling. It does not go in a straight line, but circles and cycles and turns back on itself and more than once, one finds one’s self saying, “I thought I was done with this. I thought I had moved on.” And I tell them that within the family, individuals will process grief differently and at different paces and it will seem that people are not in synch with each other, and that can be very irritating.

Oh, how many times have each of us said that “I think that I am finally done with 9/11 all ready.”

But here it is again, like bad back pain come again.

Make no mistake about it; this recent outburst of anti-Muslim hysteria is fueled by the still unprocessed grief from 9/11. Yes, there is no doubt that there is a large element of political manipulation and opportunism at work here, but none of that would work if there was not the emotional fuel of grief-driven anger about.

We all know that anger is one expression of grief. When you think about grief as having “Stages”, anger comes right after denial and before bargaining. Of course, as anyone who lost someone knows this stage stuff is really over-simplified.

But it has been very hard for people to move beyond their anger around 9/11, and for many, the last nine years have been spent cycling around this anger. And why not? It’s not like anger at 9/11 isn’t completely justified.

Trauma and death makes one feel powerless; anger as an emotion gives back a sense of power and agency.

It's been hard for many Americans to experience a satisfying and cathartic anger over 9/11 – something that would be empowering and commensurate with the sense of violation and loss that the attacks created.

A lot of people suggest, and I agree with them, that part of the reason the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq (or at least why those invasions were popular) was to express our anger at 9/11. But the experience in both of those countries has not been empowering. Think of that “Mission Accomplished Banner”; it was such an attempt to feel powerful and yet so embarrassing in its self-delusion.

Oh, I know that lots of you don't feel that embarrassment because that wasn't you, attached to that banner. I would like you to consider whether your response to 9/11 was to dissociate yourself from the attack and everything that happened afterwards. You were not really part of that US which was attacked, it was George Bush and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, that was attacked, and they, not you, did all these dumb things afterwards, like invading Iraq and setting up an illegal prison camp in Cuba. You weren't involved at all and all your anger is directed at the Republican party. Maybe that's a grief strategy, too.

Maybe the trauma of 9/11 has split us into two countries, neither one of which feels responsible for the actions of the other. To grieve together would mean that we would have to let go our anger, and it is our anger that is how we are fending off our grief.

Perhaps our country is like that abused child who splits into two, to make a personality who is safe and who hasn't experienced the worst. I mean that only metaphorically and not clinically.

So here we are again, confronted with anti-Muslim hysteria, and I include in that, not only the visible controversies that have dominated the news for the last few weeks, but also the persistence of suspicion that the President, Barack Obama, is, in fact, a secret Muslim and an agent of International Islam.

A month ago, when I started planning this sermon, I was preparing a rousing sermon, a call to arms to defend ourselves from the barbarians who are already within our own gates.

But there is a funny thing about preaching. To preach about something you have to come up with a topic and an approach, and then think about it hard for a long time, and when you do that I find that my thinking shifts and moves and evolves, and I end up with a different sermon than I planned. I end up thinking about a different scripture reading than I planned – a different timeless truth that speaks to this moment.

I started out, with this topic, really angry, but as I thought about it, it made me very sad, and upon further reflection, I am coming to peace with it.

It matters what we believe.

Listen again to the words of the 23rd Psalm.

“Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

All of us have the experience of walking through the valley of the shadow, and most of us have found some sort of a Thou whose presence has somehow helped us in our fear and dread and pain. It is the hardest spiritual struggle we face as people, to find that Thou who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes it is only a hard little pebble of surprise that we have survived another dark night of the soul. I am always surprised at how little the object of faith can be to be enough to sustain a soul.

It is that Thou whom we gather to worship on Sunday morning, to touch that small pebble of surprise that we carry in our pocket.

It matters what we believe about it. “Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.” From Sophia Lyon Fahs.

The Thou that is with me as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death which is 9/11 is this: I believe that no matter how many have beliefs that separate the saved from the unsaved and friends from enemies, and no matter how many are killed and no matter how many towers fall and no matter how many wars are fought and no matter how many books are burned and innocent people stabbed and no matter how much hysteria sweeps us or others, that in the end Hans Kung has it right: “that at the end of both human life, and the course of the world, Buddhism and Hinduism will not be there, nor will Islam and Judaism. Indeed, in the end Christianity will not be there either. In the end, no religion will be left standing, but the One, Inexpressible.” The Thou who art with me.

This is personal to me. I have a lot of fears, just like you:

all the kinds of cancer,

this old heart of mine, been broke a thousand times, yet it keeps coming back, well, it may someday stop,

I fear the person texting his dinner plans to his spouse while driving toward me in the other lane,

And I fear the hijacker on my plane when I go to see my daughter in California,

Even the asteroid that sneaks up on the Earth from out of nowhere,

but there is one thing I do not fear:

that when I walk into that dark cottage of death, as Mary Oliver calls it,

or into the white light at the end of the hospital hall,

I believe,

I know,

I have the final faith

that I will not be met by someone with a clipboard who asks me what church I went to, or how I prayed, or what I believed.

It matters what we believe.

This is liberal religion: the belief that God is beyond religion,

that all the religions of the world are, in the end, harmonious,

that in the end that the beliefs that divide will give way to the beliefs that delight in our diversity,

that there will be no final religious war,

no clash of civilizations,

no battle for God

and that while religious extremists may do a lot of damage on the way, they will not prevail.

They lack faith in humanity, yes, but mostly they lack faith in God. Their God is too small. Even our atheists believe in a God greater than that.

This is who we are. Interfaith cooperation and dialogue and peace is what we stand for; this is our message to the world and we should not be shy about speaking up for it. I will, and I hope that you will, too.