

“Remembrance, Comfort and Hope”  
Based on 2 Corinthians 4: 1, 5-10 and  
The Tenth Anniversary of the Attacks of 9/11  
by Rev. Meghan Davis, Longview Presbyterian Church  
September 11, 2011

Several months ago, a colleague of mine posted a question on Facebook wanting to know what we pastors were planning for today, the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11. My first reaction was that I didn't plan to do anything special, other than probably an acknowledgment during prayers of the people. (Actually, let's be honest, my first reaction was probably, “Are you kidding? That's months away, why would I have something planned for September?” But my second reaction was that thing about not planning anything special...)

But when I realized that the anniversary was to fall on a Sunday, I just couldn't see how a few special prayers would suffice. I found this wonderful liturgy from the National Council of Churches which we're using today. But there remained the big question: what in heaven's name would I preach about? (One thing's for sure, I'm certainly glad I didn't have to preach that Sunday ten years ago.) Then a few days ago another friend posted on Facebook, “As a person in the pew on 9/11, I need to hear that it's ok to have moved on, it's ok to still grieve, it's ok to feel forgiveness & God is in all of these.” Note to self: it's ok to have moved on, it's ok to still grieve, it's ok to feel forgiveness & God is in all of these. Yes. And no.

The more I thought about it, I just couldn't wrap my mind around the notion that, ok though it may be, that any of us has truly moved on. The events of September 11, 2001, changed the psychological and societal landscape of the United States, and perhaps even the world, as dramatically and as permanently as they changed the Manhattan skyline. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that while yes, most of us don't think about 9/11 every day of our lives—those of us lucky enough not to have lost loved ones that day probably can go several days, perhaps even weeks without 9/11 crossing our minds. As long as we don't pay attention to the news reports of the wars that were triggered in response to 9/11. As long as we don't take a plane trip and have to deal with TSA. As long as we are not Muslim or have any ethnic background that could in any way be mistaken for Muslim by those convinced that all Muslims are terrorists.

But if the events of 9/11 taught us anything, it was just how fragile our lives are. As today's scripture notes, “it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars.’” Life is fragile. Contained for a time within the clay jars of our bodies.

And some of us were lucky on September 11. My friend Max was lucky. He's a flight attendant who worked United flight 93 from Newark to San

Francisco on September 10. My friend Lawrence was lucky. He stayed at the hotel at the World Trade Center for an event the week before September 11. My friend Caroline was lucky. Her job required frequent meetings at the Pentagon. She wasn't there that day but easily could be. Others were not so lucky. Like the man who got to work early and as a result was in the towers when he otherwise wouldn't have been. Or the woman who changed her flight from September 10<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> in order to celebrate her husband's birthday. Their families and thousands more probably haven't moved on.

The scripture continues, "we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." But it seems that for most of us, September 11 didn't teach us that lesson. Our hearts and minds did not turn to God much beyond asking how such a terrible thing can happen to us—never mind the countless places all over the globe where senseless violence is a daily fact of life. We did not turn to God much beyond our assertions that God is on our side. Before we knew it, we were in a war and before long we were in two wars. As Methodist Bishop Will Willimon recently said in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*: "American Christians may look back upon our response to 9/11 as our greatest Christological defeat ... when our people felt vulnerable, they reached for the flag instead of the cross."<sup>1</sup> We reached for the flag—and I would add our military might—instead of the cross. The lessons of the flag and the military teach us to fight fire with fire, might makes right, we are number one and you better not disagree. The lesson of the cross is that you cannot overcome hatred and violence with hatred and violence. Only peace and love can overcome hatred and violence.

Etty Hillesum is considered the adult counterpart to Anne Frank. In the early 1980s her diaries and letters were first published. They were written in the last two years of her life before dying in Auschwitz at the age of twenty-nine. Though Etty was a non-practicing Jew, her writing is so full of references to God and both Testaments of the Bible that she has been claimed as a mystic by Jews and Christians alike. Her writing reveals a remarkable spiritual maturity and depth of understanding of loving not only one's neighbor, but indeed one's enemy. And this is not simply the naïve musings of a Sally Sunshine who's never had a real problem. This is written under Nazi persecution after round-ups of the Dutch Jews had begun. Etty writes about a conversation she had with a friend:

“‘What is it in human beings that makes them want to destroy others?’ Jan asked bitterly. I said, ‘Human beings, you say, but remember that you're one yourself.’ And strangely enough he seemed to acquiesce, grumpy, gruff old Jan. ‘The rottenness of

---

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Jim Wallis, "10 Years After 9/11: The Good and the Bad" posted 09/08/11 <http://blog.sojo.net/2011/09/08/10-years-after-911-the-good-and-the-bad/>

others is in us, too,' I continued to preach at him. 'I see no other solution, I really see no other solution than to turn inward and to root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war. That we must look into ourselves and nowhere else.' And Jan, who so unexpectedly agreed with everything I said, was approachable and interested and no longer proffered any of his hard-boiled social theories. Instead he said, 'Yes, it's too easy to turn your hatred loose on the outside, to live for nothing but the moment of revenge. We must try to do without that.' We stood there in the cold waiting for the tram... Our professors are in prison, another of Jan's friends has been killed, and there are so many other sorrows, but all we said to each other was, 'It is too easy to feel vindictive.' That really was the bright spot of today."<sup>2</sup>

A few days later Etty writes, "despite all the suffering and injustice I cannot hate others."<sup>3</sup> And throughout her writing, assertions such as "At the end of each day I feel the need to say: Life is very good after all."<sup>4</sup> Can you imagine? Of all people in the world who would be justified in hating the enemy and complaining about the ugliness and injustice of the world and yet this woman, a Dutch Jew under Nazi persecution was able to see the beauty of life despite it all. I like to think I would have a similar outlook in a similar situation but would I really? And Etty gets to the essence of it all in her description of a night time air raid and the realization that at any moment shrapnel could come through her window, hitting her and she writes:

"And yet, I felt so deeply peaceful and grateful, there in my bed, and meekly resigned to all the disasters and pains that might be in store for me.

"All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war...by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall only hate the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Holt Paperback, 1996), 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 86

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 88

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

Don't misunderstand, I am in no way saying we somehow deserved what happened on September 11. There is no excuse for the injustice of the suffering and tragedy and that was heaped upon thousands of innocent people and their families on that day. If only we could turn back the clock and stop it all from happening. But of course, we cannot do that. All we can do is remember those who perished, find comfort and hope in our faith and seek to help those who continue to grieve to find comfort and hope. And comfort and hope is incompatible with violence and hatred. Comfort and hope can only come from acts of loving one another, neighbor and enemy alike.

In an article titled, "America... Listen to Your Daughters of 9/11," Marlo Thomas wrote about three young women, all of whom lost a parent on 9/11, all of whom have turned their grief toward service. She writes, "If you've lost someone you've loved deeply then you know what these daughters know: Love endures. And the best way to honor it and keep it alive is to do something loving -- whether it's protecting your country or a child, looking for justice, or seeking a better understanding of someone different than you.... Talking to Anne, Alexandra and Susan reminded me that the real beacons in our lives are always there: our neighbors, our friends, our citizens and our daughters -- the tough ones, the smart ones, the compassionate ones. They have fought the anger and ideas of vengeance, choked back their tears and ten years later they are lighting the way to finding a peaceful and productive future. All we have to do is listen."<sup>6</sup>

Ten years later and American Muslims say that they feel they are the objects of more hatred and prejudice now than immediately after the attacks. We cannot hold all adherents of a particular religion or citizens of certain countries responsible for the actions of a handful of extremists any more than we can hold all Christians responsible for the shooting rampage in Norway or all Americans responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. We honor those who have died by turning to God. By turning to the cross. By looking within ourselves to root out the rottenness of hatred within ourselves and releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live.. We honor those who fell at the hands of hatred and extremism by responding with love, understanding and forgiveness. And though I doubt any of us have or ever will truly "move on," it's ok not to dwell on 9/11. It's ok to still grieve. It's ok to feel forgiveness. Because God is in all of these.

---

<sup>6</sup> Marlo Thomas, "America... Listen to Your Daughters of 9/11" posted 09/09/11  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marlo-thomas/americalisten-to-your-dau\\_b\\_954602.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000009](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marlo-thomas/americalisten-to-your-dau_b_954602.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000009)