

Christ Church in Philadelphia

“A Perfect Love that Casts Out Fear:”  
A sermon in response to the tragedy of September 11

The Rev. Timothy B. Safford, *Rector*

September 16, 2001

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 16: 1-13*

In the gospel reading today, Jesus describes God’s relentless search for all of humanity so that no one is left behind. God desires to bring us all within the protection of God’s saving embrace. Jesus says, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.”

So, in the aftermath of the vicious attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we can see that God is like those firefighters, construction workers, EMT’s and volunteers who bravely sift by the handful through the tons of rubble looking for people who may have survived. They do the work motivated by the highest of human virtues, the capacity to love.

God loves us so much, God searches for us. It is the same love we have seen this week that will defeat every enemy of the good and perpetrator of evil.

In the gospel of John, Jesus speaks these powerful words: “Greater love hath no one than this, that a man (or a woman) lay down his life for his (or her) friends” Powerfully, we saw this love last Tuesday when the rescue workers, knowing that the collapse of the towers was imminent, stayed and tried to get people out. I understand that more than 20,000 people could have easily died, but because of sacrificial love that the number will be more like 6,000. It is still a staggering, tragic number, but it is a lower number because of unconditional, life-giving love of people willing to lay down lives for their brothers and sisters.

I am moved by the love of the Rev. Michael Judge, the Roman Catholic priest and fire department chaplain who chose, though he did not have to, to stay behind at the World Trade Center to administer last rites to a firefighter who had already died. He lost his life doing so.

And this life-giving, impartial, and unconditional love appears to play a critical role on the United Airlines flight that crashed in Western Pennsylvania. What actually happened on that hijacked plane that was headed for another target may never be accurately known, but it appears that passengers were willing to sacrifice their lives and crash the plane rather than be passive to the horror of hate. “Greater love hath no one than this, that they lay down one’s life for their friends.”

This love knows no bounds. This love conquers all evil. This love, to quote scripture, casts out fear. Purely, simply, this is the love of God, stitched

into the fabric of the universe and placed preciously within every human soul to be nurtured by justice or destroyed by hate. This love seeks us all, and when finding the lost, rejoices. It is a love that buoys the destroyed soul, so that even in terror and death, somehow there is comfort and strength to move on, to begin limping toward the sunrise. St. John writes in his first epistle: “The person who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

It is ironic that the power of this love that we have seen so powerfully revealed in the last few days has been unleashed by vicious evil, and, in the weeks and years before the attack, when America was at peace with unprecedented prosperity and affluence, this love seemed woefully scarce. Will this love of the last few days continue, or will it pass away as the dust settles and debris is removed?

It was the tragedy of the death of Jesus that revealed the relentless nature of God’s love. The deepest Christian proclamation is also its most paradoxical: God’s love for the world was revealed in Jesus being nailed to the cross of Calvary. Jesus’ arms stretched out on the cross were God’s arms being wrapped around all of humanity.

Not only does the crucifixion reveal God’s love for humanity, it brings honor to the horrible deaths of last Tuesday. The cross was a death of shame, and God’s very self died on that cross, bringing dignity to every shameful death and meaning to every violent death. When Pilate and the Romans crucified Jesus, they thought the pain, shame and horror of that death would silence him and his followers forever.

Instead, the death of Jesus on the cross became the most significant moment of human history, and to this day the cross is not a symbol of shame but of the victory of God's love, working through us, giving us more than we can ask or imagine. From that cross, those who lived in the radical ethic of love who were seen as meek were made powerful, and the most humble were made mighty.

So, I believe God's love was there as those aircraft pierced the skin of the World Trade Towers and broke the tough crust of the Pentagon as sure as God's love was there when the nails pierced Jesus' arms on the cross. I know for some this is an outrageous statement, and your justifiable anger toward God wells up in your throat. "How could God's love be there, preacher, amidst such horror and evil? If God's love was there, why was it so powerless? Those are good, fair questions, for which there are no satisfactory answers. The Rev. Billy Graham touched a nerve deep within us all when he said at the national mourning service of last Friday: "I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and the God of love and mercy and compassion is in the midst of suffering." To that sentiment, though I know it offers little comfort to those who mourn, I add these words of scripture: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height or depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I don't mean to offer simple platitudes; I know Jesus' last words were, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and that those same words must have been on the lips of thousands as they, unprepared and in innocence, died violently and tragically. In ways I cannot intellectually understand but that I confirm deep in my heart, I believe God's heart was rent in two when Jesus spoke those last words of abandonment, and I am certain the first heart to break on Tuesday was the heart of God. With that broken heart, God still loves us, even the lost who would perpetuate such horror, and desires to bring us all into the saving embrace. We now join our broken hearts, as Christians have always done, with the broken heart of God, and try to become strong in the broken place for the sake of bringing the kingdom of peace and unconditional love.

Yes, it may be outrageous to say on this day of mourning, but God's love extends to the most lost and sinful of the world. The embrace from the hard wood of the cross became an embrace from God that can contain us all. God will not rest until everyone comes into that embrace. That is the core of Christian belief and basis of the ethics we promulgate. Somehow, in anger, outrage and disgust, with a desire for payback and a lust for blood, we must rely on that unconditional love and summon the courage to live out our Christian convictions.

"What woman," Jesus asks, "having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'"

God is that woman and you are that coin, bound inextricably to each other through love. And that love knows no boundary. For most of us with ten cents in our pocket, one lost cent makes little difference. We might let a coin we think insignificant, or tarnished, or different than the others, stay lost. For God, that one cent is as precious as all the others. God cares not what type of coin it is, from what country, of what language spoken, of what ethnic traditions, if it represents a rich nation or a poor one. God only wants the coin back safely in the purse of God's love. God's love makes no distinctions, shows no partiality and knows no boundary.

Now, I believe it is time to be patriotic. We need to display our flags proudly and sing our national hymns grandly. We need to celebrate our glorious and amazing nation that was unjustly and viciously attacked on Tuesday. We will not be destroyed as a people and as a nation. Do you realize those airplanes flew right by the Statue of Liberty on their way to their target in New York? Those who lost their lives will prove to be of the vast diversity of culture and nationality that is emblematic of the Statue of Liberty. The towers are gone and the death toll is unimaginable. But the vision, and the symbol of our nation still stands strong, and for that we give thanks to God, for we are certain the enduring values of our nation will endure.

But the patriot who is also a Christian knows that while patriotism and faith often travel the same road, the two sometimes diverge. When a Christian stands and proclaims his or her faith and values that differ from the direction of the nation, that is not an action of disloyalty but one of love and faithfulness. In the United States, such loving dissent is the core of patriotism.

I can barely imagine the burden our President is under along with the other leaders of government at the federal, state and city level. Our President is a person of deep faith, and I am certain that the inevitable conflicts between faith and national interest must gnaw at his soul.

He and others must work hard and diligently to insure the security of the nation and to bring the perpetrators of Tuesday's horrible crime to justice. I accept that our military will be involved. But it is a matter of faith for me to say *how* and *at what level* I believe the military should be involved.

So I say softly--knowing that these may be tough words to our raw emotions, and while respecting the huge burden that our President and government is under—I say

“No” to revenge.

If the military action of our great nation is not for security and bringing the perpetrators to justice but for revenge, and blood and false sense of security earned through excessive use of military power, then I fear we become like those who hate us.

I say this with some difficulty, but I believe the gospel of Jesus Christ demands it. Never have I found it harder to listen to the words of Jesus when he says, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

But I believe (in a way I find hard to understand, because Jesus, too, died in terror) that he really meant it. I think Jesus means that to “Love our enemy” means that even our foe who hates us is not condemned to his own

hatred and evil forever. It means that even our enemy one day can come within the saving embrace of God's unconditional love.

And it is the Christian who keeps alive the hope that in this unconditional love lies the true security of the human race.

For that unconditional love we tutor at St. John's in the after school program, and we make baloney sandwiches by the bushel for the homeless, and try to bring hot food, warm clothes and comfort to the shelter residents at Old First Reformed and we advocate for the poor, elderly residents of Kearsley Retirement Community.

The work of love is never finished. Until that work is finished, the world will live in fear of hate. But trusting in the power of God's love, I assure you, helps to dissipate the fear of last Tuesday. As scriptures say, "There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear."

Amen.