

**DISCERNING OUR CONGREGATION'S FUTURE: HOW CAN A PERSON LIKE ME BE USED BY A
GOD LIKE JESUS?**

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"THESE are the times that try men's souls." Terrorism is like a cancer that has metastasized. We can only hope and pray that the chemotherapy and radiation our nation uses to destroy it will not also destroy the body politic. As I've watched the events of last week unfold I ask, are we, as many say, a secular nation with only a veneer of religion? Or are we deeply religious with a veneer of secularism. I've begun to think that secularism is only skin deep. Scratch the surface and religious affections bleed. People of all faiths, of no faith and of uncertain faith gathered here on Tuesday evening and Friday afternoon to pray. In times like this we realize how weak and inadequate we are, and our greatest need is to turn in repentance and faith to the God of all mercy and the Father of all comfort.

Our lives have been rocked. Everything that seemed so solid has been shaken. The twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, symbols of American free enterprise and military strength - taken out. And the lives lost, more than twice as many as were lost at Pearl Harbor. Through a network of connections that unite us across this country, every one of us has been affected by the devastation of that day. And so we mourn -- mourn the fatalities and the casualties, as well as our own loss of innocence. We've been attacked on our own soil, and will never feel completely safe again.

The enormity of the tragedy becomes personal when we stories of those who witnessed the terror. Danny Bakken sat in his office building across the river from the Trade Towers and watched them crumble. The father of one of Philip's roommate works at the Pentagon. He had just left the building when the plane hit. Sean Halper, a Quarryville fireman working with the

FDNY drove his tanker truck to the site of the towers. As the first tower began to crumble he ran, but the rest of his crew are presumed lost. Kerry, a Temple University student and friend of Jessica Hammond has not heard from friends who worked at the World Trade Towers and are presumed lost.

Hal Weiner, Dorothea Murray's son in law, volunteered Tuesday at an emergency room counseling victims. There was Robert, an insurance agent, suffering from smoke inhalation. He felt guilty to be alive, and couldn't stop shaking and crying and saying that he didn't deserve to survive when so many others had been lost. Robert had come down from the 89th floor with six other people; one, a young Hasidic Jew; another, a young recently woman who had just gotten engaged last weekend. They were both lost as well as the other four. Robert got out only because a fireman chopped through a wall with a fire ax and pulled him through, "a brand plucked from the fire."

Phyllis, Dorothea's daughter, Hal's wife, is a rehabilitation RN in New York. She came home Tuesday night from a double shift. Just before going to bed, she said to Hal, "If anything ever should happen to me I want you to know I love you." "I love you" - words we all long to here but never say enough. So many cell phone calls made from the hijacked planes and from the World Trade Center towers echoed Phyllis's words. People took time to call loved ones simply to say, "I'm going to die, but I want you to know I love you." No one called to check how their stocks were performing that day. No one called to see who won the ball game the night before. This crisis enabled them to realize that love is the most important thing in the world.

In Jesus Christ, God has come to tell his lost children, "I'm about to die on the cross, but I want you to know I love you." I believe God loved all those people lost in the World Trade towers, all those people in the Pentagon, all those terrified airplane passengers. I believe God

also loved those hijackers - murderers, terrorists that they were. As incredible as it sounds, I believe God loves Osama Bin-Laden. Bin-Laden is a Saudi exile burning with anger against the U.S. He views Americans as evil infidels. He's suspected in last year's bombing of the destroyer USS Cole that wiped out 17 American sailors in Yemen. He's been indicted on charges of orchestrating the truck bombings of two US embassies that killed 224 people and injured more than 4,000 in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. He reminds me of the Apostle Paul.

Paul writes, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." In Acts we learn that Paul breathed threats and murder against the disciples. He got permission to persecute and kill Christians. In his letter to Galatian Christians he writes, "I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it." In other words, Paul had been a terrorist. He'd been a religious fanatic implicated in the murder of Christians. But he says, "I received mercy." God had mercy on a terrorist. He began to feel grief which led to repentance. So Paul could say, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost." Christ Jesus came into the world to save all those who were lost in the World Trade Center, all those lost in the Pentagon, all those lost airline passengers. And, yes, Christ Jesus came into to the world to save lost terrorists.

Presbyterians are a pro-choice church with regard to war. We're not pacifists and I'm not a pacifist. I believe that we can't ignore evil or treat evil sentimentally. Evil is real. Some of the worst injustice and suffering in the world is the result of good people simply refusing to acknowledge that evil exists and therefore do nothing to challenge it. I believe in the power of our military to avenge our losses. But do I really believe in the power of the Gospel to convert not just small potato sinners like you and me but big time sinners like Osama Bin-Laden?

Saint Francis, who lived at the end of the Twelfth & beginning of 13th - believed in the power of the Gospel.

In the thirteenth century Pope Urban II declared a holy war against Islam. He promised paradise to all who died to retake Jerusalem. Thousands of fanatical, suicidal Christians marched east to Palestine to kill Moslems for Christ. When Jerusalem was finally taken one of the crusaders wrote, "Wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames." His account goes on but becomes so jubilantly gruesome that it would be distasteful to continue.

Saint Francis went on a crusade of a different sort. He sailed to the Holy Land with a ship load of monks. When he got there he and his monks courageously walked unarmed toward the military camp of the Sultan. *like walking into Taliban ruled Afghanistan.* As they walked they sang, "The Lord is my Shepherd.... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." They were roughly seized by Arab Moslems and dragged before the Sultan. As Francis stood before the Sultan he said, "We have been sent by God to tell you that God loves you and Christ died for you." The Sultan was so surprised with the audacity of these foolish little monks that he listened with respect. The Crusaders were willing to kill for Christ. Saint Francis was willing to die for Christ so that guilty, lost sinners might be found by God's love. As far as we know, the Sultan wasn't converted but when Francis returned home, the Sultan asked him to pray for him: "Pray that God will show me the true faith."

We can only imagine what course history would have taken if the way of Saint Francis had prevailed. We can only imagine what course history may still take if we and the church regained Francis's confidence in the power of the Gospel to convert the foremost sinners. Then, maybe, God would deliver us from all that terror teaches. Amen.