

## In Response to the Oklahoma City Bombing Tragedy

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 23, 1995, the second Sunday of Easter. Scripture Lessons: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31.

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

President Clinton has declared this day as a day of national mourning - mourning for those killed in the bombing in Oklahoma City. I'm aware that I have rarely addressed the tragedies that we read about in the newspapers. We've prayed about the genocide in Rwanda and in Bosnia but I didn't address those tragedies in a sermon. We prayed for the families of those killed in the Waco massacre of the Branch Davidians two years ago, but I didn't address that event in a sermon.

If I were to address every tragedy that happens I'd be doing nothing else but addressing tragedies. Every month - nearly every week some tragedy hits someplace in the world - hurricanes, terrorist attacks, earthquakes. So I'm not addressing the tragic events of last week because it was more tragic than some of these other events. Nor am I addressing the Oklahoma tragedy because President Clinton has called upon the nation to observe a day of mourning. I would like to think that what I say is said in the light of the Word of God. I would like to think that what I say is said as a minister of the Gospel.

First of all, I want to emphasize how easy it has always been to jump to premature conclusions - to look for scapegoats - to blame innocent people for crimes for which we do not yet have suspects. Throughout history, men and women - Christians included - have blamed innocent people for crimes and tragedies they

did not commit.

For example, how many of us believed Susan Smith several months ago when she blamed two African Americans for abducting her children. Racists were pleased that their prejudices were verified. Immediately, hate crime against African Americans increased. So many of us were all too ready to believe that African Americans had kidnapped her children. We were deeply ashamed when we discovered that Susan had murdered her own children and blamed African Americans.

Last Wednesday, when I first heard about the Oklahoma bombing, those fleeing the crime were described as looking like they came from the Middle East. *Many of us were all too quick to lay blame on Arabs or Moslems.* The media has too often portrayed Arabs and Middle Eastern people as terrorists.

Several Middle Eastern men were apprehended and questioned. Two arab students at Indiana University in Pennsylvania were assaulted. We're so quick to believe our prejudices.

*Right Wing - Conservatives*

This, in fact, is what happened to Jesus. People were too eager to believe what the media manipulators had to say about Jesus. He was innocent yet he was charged with blasphemy and sedition and killed. So this tragedy tells me that I should not rush to judgment.

Secondly, the bombing in Oklahoma City may have been in retaliation for what happen in Waco, Texas two years ago. It may have been *reacting out of the* an extreme expression of the anti-federal government sentiment that fills the air waves. Two

years ago, to the very day, federal authorities invaded the property of a small religious sect called Branch Davidians. Seventy five men, women, and children were killed. The federal government harrassed and persecuted these people for 51 days before laying siege to it. From what I've read - and what I read may be wrong - but from what I've read the Branch Davidians had not broken any fire arm laws nor was their any evidence of child abuse as originally stated. I'm left to wonder if this is an instance in which a powerful government cracks down on a strange religious sect with whom few of us feel any sympathy. Governments, throughout the world, continue to persecute and scapegoat people who are adherents of small, despised religious cults. Whenever that happens - whether in Iran or Algeria or the United States Jesus is hanged on a tree again.

Can we be critical of government without contributing to the hatred and venom that leads to violence against the government?

Thirdly, it could be that this crime is an escalation of the culture wars already dividing our nation. This tragedy brings home to me the fact that our nation is involved in a civil war of sorts - a culture war. Increasingly our nation is divided - sometimes violently divided. On the one side are conservatives - conservatives are associated with pro-life, anti-gay, and anti-federal government movements. On the other side are liberals - liberals are associated with pro-choice, pro-gay/lesbian civil rights and big government.

For a number of years the war has been a shouting war - pro-lifers and



prochoicers shout at one another - ridicule one another - deal spitefully with one another. And from time to time the culture war becomes violent as when Paul Hill, a radical pro-life activist, killed Dr. Gunn, an abortionist. This rhetoric and the violence associated with it short-circuits the democratic process. For example, last week I read an article which claimed that Dr. Gunn, the abortionist who was murdered by Paul Hill, Dr. Gunn had become increasingly troubled by abortion. He was re-examining his beliefs about abortion. He had shared with a number of people that he was seriously considering refusing to do abortions any longer. But Paul Hill murdered him.

These culture wars have invaded the church. The church is divided along those same lines. The political agenda of conservative Christians looks suspiciously like the political agenda of secular conservatives - the Republican party at prayer. On the other hand, the political agenda of liberal or main line Christians looks suspiciously like the agenda of secular liberals - the Democratic party at prayer. But can it be that the church of Jesus Christ - whether liberal or conservative - has something unique - something uniquely Christian to contribute to the culture wars - something that might reduce the violence?

Finally, the Bible teaches that evil and sin are more than individual. Sin and evil is individual but more than individual. We don't know yet, for sure, who was immediately responsible for this crime of mass murder in Oklahoma City. Two white men called right-wing extremists have been accused. Men who were



