

## **THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE**

*September 11, 2011*

December 7th, 1941...November 22nd, 1963...and September 11th, 2001: in the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, these are days *that will live in infamy*. Almost 3,000 people died on this day ten years ago. Almost 3,000 people died including 343 firefighters, and 60 police officers and yes, 19 hijackers.

The images of that day, now ten years past, were forever seared into the tender flesh of our memories. You remember the TV pictures of the north tower of the World Trade Center billowing with smoke, and it wasn't a preview for the next Hollywood disaster film. It was real. And then Flight 175 crashing into the south tower...and then the horrific scene of people jumping to their certain deaths from those burning towers...and then we watched as the towers came down, first the south tower and then the north. We saw the burned and broken face of the Pentagon and the gash in the Pennsylvania woods near Shanksville made by Flight 93's crash; a crash that happened because its brave passengers kept it from its target.

Most of all, most of all we remember the rescue workers...the firefighters and the police officers: each one covered with soot and blood...each one rushing into the inferno that most were fleeing...each one committing anonymous acts of selfless heroism for a stunned nation and its suffering citizens. Let me mention just two; two who represent all those who served and died that day. Rick Rescorla was a security officer in the south tower. He escorted twenty-five hundred Morgan Stanley employees down the stairs of that tower to safety that day: twenty-five hundred, because he had been practicing. He knew what to do, and in his last phone call, his cell call to his wife, he told her: *This is the best day of my life!* Father Mychal Judge rushed to the World Trade Center. He went to pray for the victims...and to administer last rites. He died in the north tower when the south tower collapsed, and his body was the first body to be released from Ground Zero.

Mayor Rudy Giuliani honored these servants of God and humanity on September 23rd, 2001 at a memorial service at Yankee Stadium. Mayor Giuliani said:

*Like our founding fathers who fought and died for freedom...like our ancestors who fought and died to preserve our union and to end the sin of slavery... like our fathers and grandfathers who fought and died to liberate the world from Nazism, and Fascism, and Communism...the cluster of arrows to defend our freedom and the olive branch of peace have now been handed to us. We will hold them firmly in our hands, honor their memory, and lift them up toward heaven to light the world. In the days since this attack, we have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity.*

One hundred and fifty years ago, a hundred and forty years before the attacks of September 11th, Abraham Lincoln delivered his first inaugural address to a nation that teetered on the brink of civil war...a war that was virtually guaranteed simply by the fact that Lincoln had been elected president. At the end of that address, Lincoln said this:

*I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretch from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living*

***heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, they will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature...by the better angels of our nature.***

So leave Mayor Giuliani and President Lincoln, and find your way back to a long time ago when brothers faced a reunion that, for most of them, did not have a happy prospect or a good ending. You see, for Joseph's brothers, the logic of life pivoted on the fulcrum of violence and revenge. They had done everything they could possibly do to destroy Joseph, their brother, because they were so jealous of him. And now that they had found him alive, they assumed that he would do everything in his power to destroy them. So what they did was to make up a story. They made up a story about their father, Jacob, and deathbed words that they said he spoke...but I doubt it! They said that Joseph, their father, had told them to tell Joseph this:

***"I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you."***

'Maybe if we just make up something that Dad said, he won't hurt us:' that's what they thought. But Joseph didn't need the persuasion of those words because Joseph knew another logic. Through his tears, Joseph forgave his brothers. He said to them:

***"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."***

**Yes, we did meet *the worst of humanity with the best of humanity*, and in the assurance of Lincoln's words *we will again be touched by the better angels of our nature*.**

As Peter, and Jesus, and the rest of the disciples met together, Peter had a question for his Lord. And the question that Peter offered to Jesus simply was this: How big is mercy? Or, in Peter's words:

***"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive? As many as seven times?"***

And Peter asked that question fully believing that he was being magnanimous, because what Hebrew law called for was three times. Peter said: ***I'll do it seven – that's twice times three, plus one! You see how big hearted I am, Jesus! Seven times!*** But Jesus answered: ***No, Peter. Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*** Or, as other translations say it: ***seventy times seven – four hundred and ninety times.*** And the largeness of Peter's self-assessment became smallness in Jesus' critique.

Then Jesus told a parable of two slaves. The first slave was in debt to the king. He owed the king ten thousand talents. Now what you need to know about a talent is that one talent equals twenty years' wage for a common laborer. And this slave owed the king ten thousand talents. The slave begged the king for mercy, and he got it. The king forgave his debt. But then, as that slave left forgiven, he stumbled across another slave who owed him one hundred denarii. A denarius is the wage for one day of work from a common laborer; about a third of a year's wages. And the second slave begged the first to be merciful, but that first slave was not. He had

his fellow slave thrown into prison, not showing him an ounce of forgiveness. And when the king heard about it, the king reversed his position and said: ***No, you still owe me ten thousand talents worth.*** So he threw that first slave into prison, too. And the lesson in the story is this: ***we can't receive forgiveness without giving it.***

For Peter, forgiveness is an interim step: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven...and then, eight. ***Now I can do what I want to do!*** The ultimate reality for Peter was retribution and revenge, but Jesus said no.

***Yes, We have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity, and we will again be touched by the better angels of our nature.***

On April 9th, 1865 – General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House. The next day, April 10th, the news had reached Washington D.C., and the streets filled with a crowd that numbered approximately three thousand. And that crowd made its way to the White House. And there, at the White House, they called for Lincoln. They called for their President. They wanted to see him. They wanted to hear from him. And so, finally, President Lincoln appeared at the window of the White House. And he spoke for just a brief time. At the end of what he had to say, he offered this:

***“I see you have a band of music with you. I propose closing up this interview by the band performing a particular tune which I will name. I have always thought ‘Dixie’ one of the best tunes I have ever heard. I now request the band to favor me with its performance.”***

On the day after General Lee surrendered, President Lincoln asked a band to play the national anthem of the Confederate States of America at the White House.

***Yes, We have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity, and we will again be touched by the better angels of our nature.***

In the words of the Qur'an:

***Those who spend freely, whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain their anger and pardon all people – for God loves those who do good.***

These words remind us that the great religions of this world are religions of determined peace, not destructive partisanship. They remind us that the religious convictions of the September 11th terrorists are an evil disfigurement of Islam...just as any manipulation of Christianity that ignites and enrages partisan destruction and violent revenge is also evil.

***Yes, We have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity, and we will again be touched by the better angels of our nature.***

That means, friends, that finally, in the end, what builds peace is forgiveness because, of course, the truth is we can never settle the score...so why keep it? As Mahatma Gandhi said:

***An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.***

That also means that only forgiveness can defeat terrorism because forgiveness, you see, disarms the power of terror that is the power to make us afraid. As John says it so beautifully: ***Perfect love casts out fear.*** And, indeed, perfect love is synonymous with forgiveness.

***Yes, We have met the worst of humanity with the best of humanity, and we shall again be touched by the better angels of our nature.***

Today as we gather here, and as people gather all across our country, we remember the unwitting victims of September 11th so that they may never be forgotten. Today as we gather here, and all across our country, we remember the ones who rushed into danger and certain death to save others. In their selflessness, terrorism lost on the very day of its most barbaric display. Remember that: in their selflessness, terrorism lost on the very day of its most barbaric display. As Jesus teaches us:

***This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.***

Peter asked Jesus:

***“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”***

And Jesus said:

***No, Peter. No, not seven times. Forgive until you lose count.***

Or, in other words, forgiveness is not the first option, Peter, it's the only option.

To wrap our hearts, and our minds and our lives around perfect love, the perfect love of forgiveness that casts out fear:

***This is the best of humanity. These are the better angels of our nature.***

And the best of humanity...the better angels of our nature...cannot shape the broad course of races and nations unless they shape the intimate relationships that we share with each other: you know, the unforgettable faces and the personal stories of those people whose lives we love and touch each day.

On March 4th, 1865, Abraham Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address, an address that was all about setting a future course for a nation still embroiled in civil war.

***With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and for his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.***

*Yes, This is the best of humanity. These are the better angels of our nature.*

Amen.

Charles E. Mize  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
Renew Union Sunday  
September 11, 2011