

“What We Can Imagine”

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Text: Ephesians 3:1-21

It is often remarked that the two subjects you should never mention in polite company or at dinner parties are those of religion and politics. Now, because of the terrible events of this past week, everyone across our country, in schools, in coffeehouses and bars, in factories and places of commerce, in community centers and churches, everyone is talking about precisely these two topics.

The words that came most often to my mind this week are from a song by the band Over the Rhine. “They’ve taken their toll, these latter days.” Indeed, they’ve taken their toll on all of us. We’ve been shocked, saddened, and incensed. We’ve lost sleep while mourning for those whose futures went up in flames, and for those who lost the ones they love most. We’ve felt the emotions nobody wants to experience: fear, anger, hate, despair, grief, a sense of powerlessness.

As all the initial misinformation slowly on Tuesday started making sense and I began to process the gravity of our current situation, I found myself groping for the appropriate response. There is no class in the curriculum of life that teaches you how to cope with tragedies of this magnitude, nothing in the course catalog offering a seminar entitled “Seven Easy Steps to Recovering from Random Terrorist Attacks and Other World-Historical Phenomena.” The historian in me tried to think of the larger context, of the conflicts of nations, cultures, and beliefs that have been present since history began. The philosopher in me, being appropriately philosophical, wondered at the question of evil, what is it, and where did it come from. If all that wasn’t enough to give me a chronic headache, the theologian in me contemplated concepts like sin and judgment, grace and forgiveness. But it was the human in me that won out, the one that rushed to call all my family and friends and finally had to turn off the TV and just sit and weep for awhile. “They’ve taken their toll, these latter days.”

Many of us have noticed a change in our conversations and in their vocabulary, perhaps because times of crisis reveal what we really believe and who we really are, both individually and collectively. Religion and politics, those two things which nobody tends to talk about, least of all at the same time, are now in the forefront of all our minds. Let me read to you some excerpts from an email conversation I’ve been engaged in with two good friends of mine from Nashville. I imagine you all have had similar sorts of discussions with spouses, friends, and family throughout the week. These are two men I’ve spent many a late night with, talking over bad coffee and cheap pie from Waffle House, two brothers who I’d generally characterize as a couple of the nicest, most fun-loving guys around, two fellow Christians who have stood beside me and I next to them during some bitter and frustrating experiences. Let me read some of their reactions to you.

One writes,

I’m at a loss to put words to how I feel. All the emotions come up at the same time. However, this could be a true test of our faith. Last

night, one of the men in our church asked God to help us love our enemies. I have since prayed for those who committed this act and I hope that God will continue to soften my heart for them as people. However, my internal sense of right and wrong compel me to seek justice. I want them caught and punished, swiftly and without mercy....At this point, I'm ready for war. Not necessarily on the scale of previous conflicts, but in an attempt to right the wrong. If we go to war, and America calls, I will go....If called, I will go. Because, if this act goes unpunished, the next one will be bigger.... [My wife] does not want me to go if they call, I've already told her that I will. It sucks, there is a lot to lose, but it's a chance I will take for her, my family, friends, country. I don't want to live in fear, I want to be free. As we all know, "Freedom is not free."

The other says,

Like most of us, my first reaction was shock. That uncomfortable, "I know I'm not supposed to laugh, but it's the only sound that'll come out of my mouth and it beats throwing up" type of shock....I know what it's like to go to bed one night with a parent that you KNOW will be there when you wake up and to have that rug of comfort and security violently jerked out from beneath your feet. When I think of the children who went to bed Monday with parents, when I think of the parents and spouses who slept in the same house, the same bed, as the people who had their lives taken from them Tuesday morning, I shake with anger....I want someone's blood, God forgive me, I want it....I want the person, people or group that did this to feel the same thing that those families feel. I want them to go to bed with the horrible feeling in the pit of their stomach that I've had since Tuesday morning. I want them to know what they've done. I know it's awful of me to say, and I know it makes me as evil as they are, but I'd be willing to go find the worm, cut his throat, and carry his head back in a bag. My anger is not broad and sweeping. It's not directed towards the nations and communities that this person lives in, but if we have to pull out some of the grass to rid ourselves of this weed to the world, so be it. I don't want this to happen again. I want there to be an example. If you do this, we will bury you. Would I be willing to go to war? Absolutely.

One thing I've always appreciated about my two friends is their honesty and forthrightness, even when I couldn't disagree with them more. And while their reactions are all too human, it still saddens me to say that the stances they have articulated are more common than I'd like to admit. Upon reading their words, I couldn't help but remember Melville's description of Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*: "All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it."

The truth is that evil is not overcome by the way of Ahab. One cannot and will not "rid the world of evil" by bombs, soldiers, or assassinations or by exterminating all our enemies. The way of violence and vengeance only creates more victims and does nothing to eradicate the enemy within. And this is not the way of the man from Nazareth, the man that we who are Christians call Son of God and Lord, as well as Son of Man and Prince of Peace. This is neither the way nor the love that Paul, in this morning's text from Ephesians, prays that we may know.

So what is this alternative way? As we've been looking through Ephesians over some weeks now, we've seen what God has done for the readers of this letter. Through Christ, God has saved them from their old ways of death and freely given them a new chance, a new identity, and a new purpose, to be about the business of doing good and to thereby show to the world—to the rulers, the powers, the authorities—just what God has had in mind from the beginning. Through the work of Jesus on the cross, God has ended the hostility of Jew and Gentile, making peace, bringing reconciliation, creating a new humanity out of the two groups. So it is that those who were once far from God are brought near; as v.6 of ch.3 puts it, “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

This purpose of God, the creation of a new humanity, which has been accomplished and made possible in Christ, is the reason Paul is driven to his knees before the Father. He starts to speak of this in v.1, but digresses into an account of the ministry that has been given to him and guided by God's grace. In this digression, though, we still see the overall design of God's plan for his new people, in v.10, “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.” The work of God in Christ, that gift of new life, leads Paul into intercession on behalf of his readers. Listen again to this prayer, as he struggles to find the language adequate to describe this great love he wants us to know, starting in v.16: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Have you struggled to pray this week? Have you been at a loss over what to pray? Have words and faith failed you? Well, here, pray this! You now have words. Pray this prayer, over and over again, for yourself, for your fellow believers, for your enemies, for the entire world around us. Pray that we all may know this love that surpasses knowledge, this love of such great dimensions, this love that overcomes evil and hate, this love of God in Christ Jesus which we are convinced that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from” (Rom. 8:38-39).

This love leads the apostle into doxology, into praise. Perhaps that's a place some of us can't follow right now. If so, we understand. Keep praying, and remember this. There is a “power at work within us able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (v.20). In the ashes, in the rubble of Ground Zero, in the brokenness and fragility that we experience now and that may yet come remember that the power of the light still shines within you, and the darkness cannot, and will not, master it.

We don't know what the days ahead may bring. We may hear escalating and heated rhetoric on the television and around the coffee table. We may see more acts of violence and rage. The question on many minds is, “What can I do?” In an attempt to do something, anything to help, people have come together in the thousands to give blood, to donate money, to pray and to comfort each other. We should continue to do such things.

But the way of life in God, of following Jesus, doesn't stop there. Let me conclude by offering something of an alternative strategy to fighting "terrorism," a different way from that which you hear on the radio or read on the internet. First, continue to meet together and listen attentively to each other. Whether it's through a formal service or around the dinner table or in your workplace, come together to pray, to support each other, to cry, or to laugh, as many of us did Friday night. Take care of each other; make sure everyone remembers to eat and to sleep. Bear each other's burdens. Love together, question together, doubt together, but don't let each other be apathetic for that is the real enemy of faith.

Second, speak words and cultivate habits of peace. This may not make you a popular person. Yet if we believe, as Eph. 2:14 says, that "he is our peace," that "in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us," then the work of peace is part of who we are and part of what we do.

Third, use scripture responsibly. Don't choose the way of easy interpretation. There are those who are convinced that being an American and being a Christian mean one and the same thing, and though I think the biblical witness challenges such a notion as being idolatrous, you will no doubt hear some leaders and ministers using this or that verse to justify this or that position. Do not be duped into taking their word for it, just as you shouldn't be duped into taking my word for it. Read and think for yourselves and ask God to guide your study.

Finally, because we have a God at work within us who can accomplish more than we ask or imagine, I invite you to begin today to do just that. To ask. To imagine. Imagine a new world and work to create it. Imagine a world where violence is no longer an option for humanity. Imagine a world where God's love dwells in your heart and in the hearts of those around you. What can you imagine? What can we imagine? Etty Hillesum, a young, intelligent, vibrant woman of Jewish background, kept a diary during the Nazi occupation of Holland between the years of 1941-1943. In her last entry, before being taken to the camps, before having her life so cruelly interrupted, Etty imagined the following. I close with her words, words that because of their context can only be described as words of love, forgiveness, and healing; they are, I think, words from God. They are the words of a woman going to a concentration camp; they are the words of a man carrying a cross through the streets of Jerusalem. "I have broken my body like bread and shared it out among men. And why not, they were hungry and had gone without for so long....We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds." Let's pray.