

Ten Years Later

A meditation on being called to heal the world

I Corinthians 1: 18-19

Matthew 4: 1-11

[On the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, Augsburg College Chapel, 12 September 2011]

*Nothing is as whole as a heart that has been broken.
All time is made up of healing of the world.
Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.
Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.*

[after Rabbi Nachman of Breslav; from *Kaddish*, Lawrence Siegel]

I am not really sure what more I can say to mark this tenth anniversary of the horrific tragedies of that Tuesday morning we now know iconically as 9/11. If you have read the newspaper and blog accounts, witnessed the moving ceremonies in Pennsylvania and New York and Washington and elsewhere around the world, listened to those whose family members perished on that fateful day, heard from our nation's leaders – past and present – who offered their words of lament and hope, and engaged with each other in discussion of what it all means to those of us who live in a post 9/11 world, you surely are aware of how our lives have been changed by these events of ten years ago. We are different as human beings because of how evil entered our world on that brilliant Tuesday morning in 2001.

So instead of looking back, perhaps we might best look to the future. What does it mean for those who have lived – and in the case of many of our students, grown up – in this post 9/11 generation?

Clearly the past ten years have offered considerable evidence of a world that is broken – the facts are clear in wars and economic downturns and religious and political strife at home and around the globe.

And yet, there also are important signs of hope found in the midst of this tragedy. And for me, that hope is most powerfully known here at Augsburg – in this chapel, in this college and in this neighborhood, where God's diverse creatures are gathered to be educated, to build community, to be with and for each other in our efforts to live as God's people, to follow the calls each of us has received to be God's people in the world. And the power of this hope is not in some homogenous, one size fits all, vision of this work, but in the very diversity of our backgrounds and gifts and talents and aspirations that together offer the world educated men and women – accountants and scientists and teachers and preachers and artists and social workers and nurses and parents and citizens – who understand that they have been called to

meaningful and significant and faithful work on behalf of a world that is broken – no doubt about it – and a world that God loves so very much – faith tells us so!

I find a compelling challenge to address this tension between our brokenness and hope in the work of the chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, who has written in his *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken Books, 2005) that all human beings have an innate moral goodness that has been corrupted by the many ways in which we are separated or fragmented from each other (and from God). Life, according to Sacks, is God's call to responsibility. What Sacks is arguing for is the inextricable link between ethics and devotion – between doing good and understanding and believing why. Whether we come to the issue from within the Jewish tradition – with all of its powerful role models of good and faithful lives – or from our own traditions, we still can learn from the message that what we do fragmented from a firm sense of why leads to a fractured world. When we give in to the world's temptations, to its brokenness, we sever our work from its larger purposes in the world. When we heed the call of faith, we place our trust in our awesome and gracious God, and follow God's call to heal a broken world.

Our scripture readings – assigned for this day – offer us important insights into how we might hold on to this hopeful vision of our lives together here at Augsburg and beyond, despite the fear and anxiety we see and feel and know around us in the world. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, puts it quite bluntly when he proclaims the “foolishness (of the cross) to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” It is at the heart of our faith that nothing we can do will earn us our redemption. It is by faith that we have been saved, and thus we are freed for each other, freed to do God's work in the world. And yet there is a very real tension in this claim in which we must live – it is the tension of living in a world for which the cross is foolishness even as we are called because of the cross to heal this world, to be God's people here and now.

The good news in this morning's familiar story of how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness before he began his formal ministry is that in the example of how Jesus responded to the devil's temptations, we are offered both a clear picture of the broken world's ways and a vision of what God intends for God's world. We are called to be disciples, to be those whose lives and work follow Jesus' example. We are called to heal the world that is broken.

I find the three classic temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness especially instructive today – both as we consider how our lives have changed since 9-11 and how we might go forward with renewed resolve to live more faithfully into God's intentions.

First, there is the devil's temptation to feed our hunger by turning stones to bread. In our own experience, here is the temptation to be anxious and fearful about material needs. Here are the decisions we make, not only about food, but about the priorities we set for spending and saving, about the economic principles and practices that often define our lives together. And here we are, in 2011, embroiled in wars that have cost our country more than \$3 trillion in the last ten years, in an economic tailspin that is leaving families without jobs and home, in a world

where what we know to be an abundance of food is not able to reach thousands of our fellow humans – God’s good creatures – who are dying of famine in the Horn of Africa. We are called to heal the world and yet the world would tempt us with the threat of scarcity.

And then there is the devil’s temptation to worry more about our own safety and security than that of others. I heard a respected military leader proclaim in one of yesterday’s many speeches that “We sought the vengeance that was our due after 9-11 and we have been victorious.” It is a temptation that is illustrated by the continued violence and fighting that saps our country’s spirit and resources. God has called us to heal the world and yet we perpetuate the cycle of violence that kills and kills again – kills our own people and those of other lands – so that we might purport to be safe and secure.

Finally there is the devil’s temptation to rule the world, to sell our souls so that all power might be ours. It is hard these ten years later not to be struck by how little time passed after 9-11 before we put aside the promise of unity and peace that seemed so pregnant in the days following the tragedy. We saw glimpses of people praying together, of reaching across religion and national and ethnic and political boundaries, of common purpose and action to bind up the world’s wounds. And then it was gone. Gone so that we might judge as possible terrorists those whose looks and religions and ethnic identities were different than our own. Gone so that we could accuse each other of naivete and folly in our political lives. Gone so that we might harangue each other with incivility and hostility. We are called to heal the world and yet the world would have us seek not unity and peace, but fragmentation and hatefulness.

To follow God’s call is not easy. We live in the world with all of its temptations, which are difficult to resist. We ourselves are frightened and anxious. Surely among us there are those who have been wounded by economic downturns, touched in some way by violence and hatred, separated from God and each other. And yet we are called – more urgently than ever – to lives of faith, equipped with what we learn and experience here, to be God’s people in a broken world.

There is a beautiful passage in Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies* (Anchor Books, 1999) that seems fitting in the spirit of this occasion of imagining our calls to heal the world, even when it seems difficult and perhaps on some days, impossible. Lamott writes, first quoting a Leonard Cohen song:

“‘There are cracks, cracks, in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ I loved that line the first time I read it, sleepless at 2 a.m., with my life falling apart around me. Over the last four years, however, I’ve come to appreciate that thought in an even deeper way. Cracks aren’t just how the light gets in to us in our misery and darkness – it’s how light shines through us to other people. My life is not held together with brick and mortar; I gave up on that project long ago, thank God! My life is held together now with translucent crazy glue, and when I cover the cracks in my life I cover up that light that shines through them.

“I may not exactly wear my brokenness on my sleeve these days, but it’s there, right under the cuff. It doesn’t show when I’m not moving. It doesn’t show when I’ve got my arms clasped safely in front of me. But it does show every time I reach out my hands.”

We pray the words of Rabbi Nachman’s Kaddish, the prayer of mourning – not so that we might dwell on what has come before, but so that we might pray with confidence of God’s will for our future – a future that calls us to lives of light in the darkness, of healing in the midst of brokenness, of faith in God’s will on earth as in heaven.

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All time is made up of healing of the world.

Return to your ships, which are your broken bodies.

Return to your ships, which have been rebuilt.

Thanks be to God, who loved the world so very much that he sent his only Son to redeem all of creation, and who then sent us to be light and healers and peacemakers. May it be so. Amen.