

“Homeland”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
September 11th, 2011

Psa. 139:7-12

Matt. 18:21-35

“Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol [if I lie down in hell], you are there.”

Psa. 139:7-8

Let us pray... O God,

The world has changed, but you remain constant – our *eternal* Guardian;

and your kingdom – your beloved community, waits to be re-discovered.

Amen

Psalm 139 is similar to Jonah’s prayer

when he was in the belly of the ‘whale’ – the big fish, sent by God

to fetch him back to confront his enemies and bring peace.

Jonah 2:1-10

^{2:1}Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,²saying,

‘I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

³ You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,

and the flood surrounded me;

all your waves and your billows passed over me.

⁴ Then I said,

“I am driven away your sight;

how shall I look again upon your holy temple?”

⁵ The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped around my head ⁶ at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever;

yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.

⁷ As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD;

and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

⁸ Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!’

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish,

and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Willard, p.2

When I read and hear these words, I think of the terrible circumstances
faced by those people in NY, in DC, and in the sky over PA
that morning ten years ago.

I think of how frightened they must have been
and how those who knew they would soon die
also knew that the world was changing
and that it was beyond their seeing, then, as to how it would all turn out...

Cell phones were not so common back then,
but those who had them, jammed the circuits that day –
calling 9-1-1 to tell someone what was going on,
calling to get in touch with loved ones
to find out where they were or to tell them they were all right –
or to say goodbye and ‘I love you.’

What has happened since? What have we learned in ten years?
That is a matter of debate, isn't it?

So many people – too many people have been killed
and so many homelands have been molested by violence
since that terrible day ten years ago.

Our country is still fighting in Afghanistan even as we are drawing down
from the war in Iraq.

England, Spain, Pakistan, India, Russia, Israel, Germany, Darfur, Indonesia,
and Norway are among nations besides Afghanistan, Iraq, and the US
that have lost people directly and indirectly as a result of 9/11.

And the number of people killed and wounded is countless
in tens of thousands – perhaps millions by now
and people are still dying and being injured.

Our military leaders learned from the fighting in Iraq
that violence by itself would not bring peace.

The “Surge” in Iraq – credited with turning the tide in that war,
put more American troops on the streets in contact with Iraqi civilians.

At the same time, groups of Sunni insurgents were repatriated
to fight against Al Qaeda foreign fighters, Shia extremists,
and those Sunnis who remained loyalists of the old regime.

The forgiveness of former enemies proved to be an effective military strategy
in reducing violence and providing time for Iraqis to form
a more stable government of self-determination.

Willard, p.3

A similar 'surge' strategy has been implemented in Afghanistan
where its success still remains to be seen.

Pakistan – long suspected of harboring Al Qaeda and Afghani Taliban,
was exposed for having factions sympathetic to these extremists
when Osama bin Laden – the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks,
was discovered and killed there.

There's no getting even for the blood that has been spilled;
The only way out of the endless cycle of violence is forgiveness –
to love one's enemies
and repatriate them back into the homeland.

In the early 1990s, I used to have a long commute, driving to work
and I used to listen to public radio on the way in
which told the news through stories.

That was the time when the Soviet Union had collapsed
and some countries descended into civil war.

Yugoslavia split into three warring factions –
Catholic Croatians, Orthodox Christian Serbians, and Muslim Bosnians.

Serbia formed itself according to historical regional claims
and 'ethnic cleansing' followed according to historical hatreds.

The Serbians had the upper hand over Muslims in their territory
and were systematically annihilating them while the world stood by.

There was one story about two men of these two factions
who happened to encounter each other.

They both had guns and the Bosnian's gun jammed.

Then, the Serb said,

'Brother, why are you killing me?' before *he* pulled the trigger.

And I thought, then, the only way out of this madness for all of them
was forgiveness.

There is only one thing that cannot be forgiven, though –
and that is a hardened heart.

Those who have closed their hearts and minds to anything
but their own extreme view of what they think is fundamentally Truth,
leaves no option for forgiveness
or to still learn about what really should matter –
like rational loving-kindness.

That is what killed Christ and what continues to kill in our time.

Willard, p.4

As it is written in Zechariah 4:6b,

“... Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”

It is the same lesson that our military strategists applied
in recognizing and repatriating insurgents
whose hearts had not been hardened.

Jesus said in his parable that

‘...the kingdom of heaven may be compared
to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.’

and though Jesus concluded that
just as the harsh king of the parable judged the cruel servant,
so, would God judge everyone who
does not forgive their brother and sister from the heart.

But what this also implies is that

the way into the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom of God,
is through forgiveness –
and not just being forgiven, but by forgiving, as well.

The kingdom of heaven is the homeland of those who forgive –
the beloved community that is yet possible as a social reality
‘on earth as it is in heaven.’

If there is one thing we should have learned from 9/11,
it is that you can’t love God without first loving people.

When will humankind learn this? When will we learn this?

When will we learn to apply creative options like forgiveness
or listening to what the other side has to say
before their position is hardened by zealots
or before hardening our own hearts?

Will we learn before it is too late –

Will we learn before we find ourselves asking,
‘Where has our world gone?’

Where have all the flowers gone...

Amen

*Our lesson is from Psalm 139 which is described as
‘a prayer for deliverance from personal enemies’.
Verses 7-12 remind us that God is always present
even when we feel isolated and in places or situations
we would rather not be.*

^{139:7} Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say,

‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night’,

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Matt. 18:21-35

[21] Then Peter came up and said to him,

"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?
As many as seven times?"

[22] Jesus said to him,

"I do not say to you seven times,
but seventy times seven.

[23] "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared
to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

[24] When he began the reckoning,

one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents;

[25] and as he could not pay,

his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children
and all that he had, and payment to be made.

[26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him,

'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

[27] And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him
and forgave him the debt.

[28] But that same servant, as he went out,

came upon one of his fellow servants
who owed him a hundred denarii;
and seizing him by the throat he said,

'Pay what you owe.'

[29] So his fellow servant fell down and besought him,

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

[30] He refused and went and put him in prison
till he should pay the debt.

[31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place,
they were greatly distressed,

and they went and reported to their lord
all that had taken place.

[32] Then his lord summoned him and said to him,

'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me;

[33] and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant,
as I had mercy on you?'

[34] And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers,
till he should pay all his debt.

[35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,

if you do not forgive your brother [and sister] from your heart."