



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Spacious Skies, Love and Fear,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 11, 2011

Who among us is not remembering, if you're old enough, that day, ten years ago? There's so much to hold; and I hope you're holding it gently, with compassion for yourself and for others. I'm glad we're here together.

September 11, 2001, was the day I started divinity school. That day shaped us, we who wanted to be religious leaders. It showed us now much it all matters--what we say and do and believe. It reminded us that religion and the name of God can be used for good and for ill.

This week I'm remembering not just that one day ten years ago, but the days that followed it. For they were unlike any I've ever known. Driving back and forth to Cambridge, one thing I remember was the traffic. That famous Boston traffic, known for its creative and aggressive drivers. It was quiet and gentle, even. No one blew their horn, no one cut another off. Those of us on the road seemed part of a sober and somber procession. Maybe others were like me, alternately driving along in silence; later crying as I listened on the radio to stories of loss and grief and courage.

On one of those sunny September days, I looked up and noticed how empty and beautiful the sky was. With the planes all grounded, there were none of those vapor trails jets leave behind. The spacious skies of those days symbolize for me the sabbath-like quiet that fell on our land, as we grieved for all that had been lost.

And this was not confined to our borders. Around the world people joined their hearts with ours. “Today, we are all Americans,” they said. This is one of the blessings of grief and loss. It opens us to our common humanity. It can cause us to open our hearts to one another.

This is one of the reasons I became a minister; because of what is a privilege it is to be with people at times of death and grief. You don't have to be a minister to know this; many of you have experienced it too. It's hard, but often it is beautiful.

When I think of those September days ten years ago, I remember those spacious skies. The poet Brian Andreas remembers that time in words I put at the top of today's order of service:

In those days we finally chose
To walk like giants and hold the world
In arms grown strong with love,

And there may be many things we forget
In the days to come,
But this will not be one of them.

God, how I wish that were so. I'm sorry to say that, in these ten years, we have forgotten the call of those difficult and vulnerable days. The call to love one another, and even our enemies; to not repay evil with evil. Too often we have responded to this terrible challenge, not with love, but with fear.

This is understandable; it's a very human response. But it's not one we should encourage or be proud of. As Americans and as people of faith, we say we hold ourselves to a higher standard.

We have spent billions on warfare and weapons overseas and hardening targets at home, but little effort trying to understand the causes of the terrorist attacks. We have ignored values we once respected, such as due process and just war theory. We have yet to face what Martin Luther King Jr. saw so clearly back in 1967, when speaking out against the Vietnam War. He said, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today (is) my own government." We have yet to face our own shadow.

"There are only two feelings," Michael Leunig writes, "Love and fear:
There are only two languages, Love and fear:
There are only two activities, Love and fear:
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results, Love and fear,
Love and fear."

Ten years ago, I hoped that as a country we might somehow take this terrible thing that had happened and use it for good. That we might search our hearts and our history and wonder why some people would go to such lengths to harm us. That we might, as Lincoln said, "have a new birth of freedom."

Two weeks ago, Cornel West wrote a column saying that Martin Luther King wouldn't have cared about a memorial on the national mall. No, West says, King wanted a revolution: "A revolution in our priorities, a re-evaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life and a fundamental transformation of our way of thinking and living..."

While he was being held in Birmingham Jail, Rev. King wrote, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

I know that too often I have acted out of fear rather than love. And so I repent for the times that I could have spoken up or spoken out; for the times that I turned away when I might have been of use; for the times I let discouragement and despair keep me from doing the small good that I was capable of.

Do you think that now, ten years later, we might begin to repent for what we have done and for what we have left undone? Might we begin to hold our leaders, and ourselves, accountable--to live up to our own ideals? Might we be a country that cares as much for justice as it does for liberty?

There is plenty we can fear. There always will be. But we are made for more than that. We are made for love--for love that gives us strength and courage to do what needs to be done. We can't do everything. But we can do something. I can do something. And so can you.

The hymn says, "We'll build a land where we bind up the broken,
We'll build a land where the captives go free...
Where justice shall roll down like waters and peace like an ever flowing stream."

But you know that justice and peace do not come quickly, or easily. If we sing those words, we'd better be willing to then put our faith into action.

We who live in a time of fear must say, "We will not be fearful people." We must remember who we are and whose we are. So that we can hold one another, and the whole world, in arms grown strong with love.

Amen.