

Sermon: The Nature of the Challenge
(In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001)

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Scripture Readings: Psalm 27:1-6, 13-14, Luke 6:27-36

Today's Gospel lesson is one of the most familiar of Jesus' teachings. It is a reading that we usually look forward to hearing and that I enjoy preaching about. Today it is a difficult passage. I turn to this because in this terrible time we need to remember the truest calling of our faith and our humanity. In the depths of despair we need to look to the greatest heights of human and divine inspiration so that we may truly be pulled up into the light.

Our Gospel reading is Luke 6:27-36:

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

May God grant us understanding and hope as we hold these words in our hearts.

You have surely, as I have, found great hope in the outpouring of support that has come this week in the wake of Tuesday's terrorist attacks. The amount and extent of the offers of help has been truly amazing. As Daniel Schorr remarked yesterday, “It's as if people said, ‘You want some of my blood? I'll give you my blood.’” One of the stories that brought a little smile to my face came Friday night after the local schools had held a drive for rescue supplies. Many of your probably joined in when we were asked to donate snacks, bottled water, Gatorade, gloves, socks and T-shirts for the rescue workers. It was a very effective appeal to schoolchildren. I understand they have now been swamped with these things. If nothing else, it gave children a concrete way to respond. My middle-school daughter enthusiastically worked to fill this request and we sent in some snacks (she suggested Powerbars as they need protein) and socks. That evening I was listening to the reports on National Public Radio when they interviewed a rescue worker and asked

him how they were being cared for. He said, “We’re being treated very well. People have given so much. There are even socks and t-shirts.” We all felt just a little bit better with that connection to the rescue efforts.

Hearing this sermon introduction one may be thinking, “Well, of course. Of course people would respond like that.” Not necessarily so. It could have been different. It could have been even worse. There could have been looting, or a mass exodus of people fleeing the area, or widespread hoarding of food and water as people in their fear looked only after themselves. It is not an “of course.” It could have been much different. The immediate relief effort was a huge challenge to the New York community. In fact, to the entire nation. And we rose to the occasion. At the time of the greatest sadness and terror that any of us may ever face in our lives we came through. The best impulses of our heart and faith—compassion, care, love, strength—prevailed and so the blood collection centers were overwhelmed, city officials had to send excess volunteers home, and warehouses have filled with donated socks and t-shirts.

On Tuesday President Bush said, “America has been challenged.” We have been challenged, in many ways. The most immediate and probably the easiest is the initial relief efforts. In this we have shown the best of the American character and we are persevering. The other challenges that are facing us are not so simple and will require that we continue to give and show the best of our faith and ourselves for years to come.

The other immediate challenge is to each of us personally. One of the saddest symbols of the loss to our community is in the Long Island Rail Road parking lot. At a meeting Friday morning town supervisor Frank Petrone told me that the town was still monitoring 70 abandoned cars in the parking garages. This is only a small measure of the enormous loss felt by us all. The thousands lost means hundreds of thousands family members and friends stuck in the mind-numbing pain of waiting for some news and the heart-wrenching pain of tragic loss.

To the families of those still missing we pray for strength and courage. We pray for the continued efforts of the rescue workers to exhaust all efforts to find survivors. We pray that loved ones may be comforted by the promise of faith that God’s arms will wrap around those who are lost and comfort them with the divine presence. The challenge, which we as a community will gladly respond to, is to remember the firefighters, the police officers, and other rescue workers who gave their lives helping others. Their sacrifice is the greatest gift any one can give. We will be inspired for the rest of our lives by their heroic acts.

Each of us has been touched by this tragedy. There is no degree of separation. Let us face our grief through prayer, through listening, and by going extra easy on each other. Emotions are very close to the surface right now, so it is now more important than ever to be kind and loving to friends and stranger in all the situations of our lives.

Another challenge that has no easy solution is to the law enforcement, military, and government leaders to achieve justice and to secure a lasting peace. Let us be mindful of

the words of Jesus, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The results that we seek should lead to justice, not revenge; to a lasting peace and security, not just quick retribution. A gift we can give to the world right now is to be patient with our leaders. Give them time to find the best solution to this quandary. Remind them that we wish to resolve this challenge as we are all the others—by showing the best of that which we are made. May they show wisdom, restraint, and compassion while not wavering from the pursuit of justice. Peace without justice is a vain pursuit, and justice cannot be achieved without following the goal of lasting peace.

This week there was a statement signed by more than 100 U.S. religious leaders of all major faith communities. This is as unprecedented as the unified votes of congress this week. The statement, signed by the UCC president John Thomas, said in part, “In the name of God, we too demand that those responsible for these utterly evil acts be found and brought to justice.... But we must not, out of anger and vengeance, indiscriminately retaliate in ways that bring on even more loss of innocent life...we can deny (the terrorists) their victory by refusing to submit to a world created in their image.”

As great as these challenges are possibly the greatest is the spiritual challenge. All week people have been asking why? Why did this happen? Where was God in all of this? Questions about God are generally the deepest questions of our hearts about ourselves. What did we do? How am I apart of this? What kind of person am I? These are profound questions that are going to require some painful and honest soul-searching in the United States as to the kind of people we wish to be and the kind of leader our nation may be to the world.

Some people have been claiming to know the mind of God. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson have gone so far as to say that God lifted the divine protective shield that they think is over America to punish us for being such a secular society. They blamed the American Civil Liberties Union, homosexuals, and abortionists for creating the climate for this to happen. Never mind that many of us supporters of civil liberties, gay rights and abortion rights are deeply religious people. Never mind that the United States is the most religious society in the developed world. The bottom line is no one can ever presume to know the mind of God.

What we can know from our scriptures and the testimony of the Christian church is that “God is love.” God wishes us to be in God’s image—people of infinite love and compassion.

The number of people responding to the rescue efforts has been amazing, but an even larger response this week as been the number of people who have been praying. People have been gathering in churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, homes, and on street corners. Friday night I had the privilege to attend a Hindu prayer service in Hempstead. This hastily called service by the Shree Swaminarayan branch of Hinduism was attended by over 300 people—almost all immigrants from India. This particular sect is noted for their large giving and humanitarian efforts. I was deeply moved by the service. It looked a lot different from our services—there were exotic Indian statues and priests in orange

robes. It sounded a lot different that our services—there was Sanskrit chanting and I couldn't understand much of what was spoken. Yet, when the words were translated to me I realized that the sermon could have been given from this pulpit. The pain that was being expressed, the comfort that was being given, and the call to justice, peace, compassion and tolerance were the same.

It is a spiritual challenge and the good news is that the spirit is up to the challenge. The good news is also that we, all of us Americans, are up to the challenge.

We can rise to the challenge by doing as the rescue workers—listen to the best of ourselves and our faith traditions. God is with us. We are people capable of enormous acts of charity, extraordinary feelings of compassion and exemplary expressions of the values that we hold dear: peace, liberty, tolerance and love.

There is one practical thing you can do. Call a Muslim friend and tell him/her that you care. There are many frightened people in our country right now. Planning for our afternoon “Blessing of the Children” service I have been working with Sanaa Nadim, the Muslim chaplain at SUNY Stony Brook. She said many of her Muslim friends are afraid to come to the service because they fear their fellow citizens. We have assured her that the Suffolk police will be here to provide protection for everyone coming to this prayer service. It is painful to think we need to go to such measures for a worship service at our church. But the threat they are feeling is real. We need to assure our Arab and Muslim neighbors that most of us Christians are loving people who are concerned about them. They are an integral and wonderful part of our American Mosaic. In this time of fear they need to know that we care. We all need to be assured that prejudice will not rule the day, but that love, that long distance runner will again triumph over the horrors of evil.

So I stand here today more sure than ever of the promise of the Psalm:

^{27:13} I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!