

**Pentecost 15-C- Proper 19
September 16, 2001
Tragedy Sunday**

In the name of the God who becomes known to us through all of the world's religions, Amen.

As all of you can imagine, I, like the rest of America, had a much different plan for this morning. Today is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. I had great plans to talk about where we've come as a church and a people over this time, and the wonderful influence ordained women have had on all of us. Our gospel for today was supposed to be the one with that image of God as the good housewife, the one we always seem to skip when we list our metaphors for God.

But, of course, we are not going to talk about any of that. Every subject, other than the one that is on all of our minds and hearts, seems pretty unimportant right now.

This morning then, I want to begin with a couple messages you probably have not heard in the mainstream media, even if you have been watching and reading every moment since Tuesday morning. The first is a letter from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church,

Frank Griswold, sent to all of us on Tuesday.

The second is a letter sent on Wednesday to President Bush from The Dalai Lama.

This morning, I would like to address that central question that the Dalai Lama puts before us, because I believe he has struck at the heart of the issue. How do we address the root cause of this violence? Where does this hate and anger come from?

I believe that understanding why and how people could be so upset with us that they would resort to such unspeakable acts is the key to dealing with our grief, anger, and righteous indignation. As the facts become known, it appears as if this attack was orchestrated by those who associate themselves with the religion of Islam. One of the first reactions that I heard in this community to the event was “Well, what do you expect from a religion that justifies violence? We’ve got to stop them.” There has already been an attack on a mosque in Texas and I know of at least two cases of arson in Salt Lake City, one on a restaurant owned by a Muslim, one on another mosque.

So let us start right here. The nation of Islam is not responsible for this heinous act. The religion of Islam does not justify such activity

and never has. Americans seem to have less knowledge and understanding of Islam than we do about any religion. And of course, what we do not understand becomes easy to be suspicious of and to see as our enemy.

So let us start with a quick background in the theology of Islam. Perhaps most important to me in understanding the tenets of Islam comes from the root of the name itself. Derived from s-l-m, you might recognize a Hebrew word of the same root, shalom. Islam primarily means “peace”, but its full connotation is “the peace that comes when one’s life is totally committed to God.” Another great gift that Islam has given the world is its understanding of God as monotheistic. Islam also honors Jesus as a prophet and accepts his virgin birth.

Westerners have often seen Islam as a religion that stresses seeing God as vengeful. But in the Koran, Islam’s sacred text that attempts to explain the tenets of the Bible in greater detail, God’s compassion and mercy are cited 192 times, and his wrath 17 times.

The heart of Islam is contained in the same message we heard in our Gospel this morning, the beatitudes. There are five central tenets in the faith, and the first is love and charity toward all. The Koran is

an attempt to expand on the message of Jesus and explain HOW we are to love our neighbor, and it goes into great detail about these specifics. It also stresses racial equality and has achieved a remarkable degree of interracial coexistence.

It is also interesting to note what the Koran says about the use of force. We have heard much about the Muslim concept of *jihad*, a holy war, in which martyrs who die are assured of heaven. And while the Koran does not council pacifism, it does teach forgiveness and the return of good for evil. “Turn away evil with that which is better”, is the exact quote. The Koran also explicitly states that a holy war is a defensive one. “Defend yourself against your enemies, but do not attack them first: God hates the aggressor.”

The Koran also explicitly states that it is wrong to take one’s own life, and specifically says that giving one’s life to take another is a sin against all mankind.

Obviously, therefore, the religion of Islam not only does not condone what has happened, it specifically prohibits it. The people who committed this act are not only outside the tenets of the Islamic faith, they are guilty of perverting one of the world’s most important

faith traditions. Now of course the question is, how does one take a religion with these tenets and somehow twist it so to justify this action?

I believe the answer is one that we have seen played out in every major religion. There are always those in every faith tradition who suggest that the revelation of God in their religion is the only valid one, that all other revelations of God and religions must be wrong because theirs is right. We have a name for this. It's called fundamentalism. Fundamentalists in any religion or any form of politics believe that there is no value in any worldview other than their own. And though fundamentalists will say that they are following their wisdom tradition's teaching of the Golden Rule or love of neighbor, someone please explain to me how you can love someone when you think that what they believe is evil. Because, invariably, the next step after seeing someone's religion as invalid, is to see it as a threat to humanity, because, after all, people can only be saved if they believe like me. And once you see it as a threat, it suddenly becomes evil, and then the people in that religion or culture become evil.

This progression is not limited to the perpetrators of this

dastardly deed, but it certainly includes them. All fundamentalist thought, when it becomes rigid enough, follows this pattern. And I am sure all of you have been directly exposed to it within the framework of the Christian religion.

The Islamic religion speaks directly against this fundamentalism. The Koran says, *“Let there be no compulsion in religion.To every one have We given a law and a way...And if God had pleased, he would have made all humankind people of one religion. Be he hath done otherwise, that He might try you in that which he hath severally given unto you; wherefore press forward in good works. Unto God shall ye return, and He will tell you that concerning which ye disagree.”*

Muslims also have the direct words of the prophet Muhammad on this. “Will you then force men to believe when belief can come only from God?” Once, when a deputy of Christian visited him, Muhammad invited them to conduct their service in his mosque, adding, “It is a place consecrated to God.”

There is no place in the Islamic religion for a fundamentalist approach, no place to say that we are right and the rest of the world is wrong. It is a desecration of Islamic belief.

Directing our anger at Muslims is not only a perpetuation of the violence, it is also totally misdirected. So then, what do we do with this? What do we do to resolve the pain and suffering? What do we do to change the world in which we live? Perhaps we cannot directly eradicate the conditions that allowed people to progress from, 1)we know the truth and you don't to 2)because you don't teach the truth you are evil, to 3)because you are from Satan, I must kill you.

But on the other hand, I think perhaps we can begin, and we can begin, right here, today. We start with those around us. When others tell us that their path to God is the only true path, let us stop them right there. Let us point out to them that this is the exact thought process that leads us to hate and demonize others. And let us point out that none of the world's great faith traditions makes such exclusive claims. We have seen that the Islamic religion certainly does not. And neither does Christianity.

The age old argument from a Christian fundamentalist is that Christianity is the only way, because it says so in the Bible. Okay, let's take a look at the text that is always used to suggest such a point of view. It's from the Gospel of John, and is a quote from Jesus. "No

one comes to the Father, except through me.” See, we are told, Christ is the only way. Huston Smith, perhaps the world’s foremost authority on world religions, spoke to us at Spring Weekend in Salt Lake about just this argument. His return question is, “Okay, so who is ME in this quote.” Does ME refer to Jesus, the human figure that walked on the earth? Well, let’s hope not, because if that were the case, none of us, except those who were with him in the first century could come to the Father. Certainly no one could think that. So, then we must be speaking about Christ, the eternal, not just the man who walked the earth. What does the Gospel of John say about Christ. Well, let us read it. The prologue to the entire gospel, the explanation of it all. In the beginning...

Christ is the Word. Christ is the God who was here at the beginning and now and forever. That God of course, is the God that all of has access to, regardless of our faith tradition. Just like Islam, mainstream Christianity makes no claims to be the only pathway.

The possibility that any of us could know with assurance that one religion is superior to another strikes me as the height of arrogance and conceit, once again the opposite of what all the wisdom traditions

teach us. Arnold Toynbee in his book *Civilization on Trial*, puts it this way. “No one alive knows enough to say with confidence whether or not one religion is superior to the others.” A bumper sticker says it another way. “God is too big for one religion.”

If we are to point our finger at the root cause of this violence, we must see that it is closed-mindedness, non-acceptance of other’s religion and way of life, and not listening to others. It is born out of rigid fundamentalism, when others are demonized because they do not believe like you. And it is opposite of what Islam, Judaism and xianty teach.

My friends, the world is too small of a place for us to not accept each other and try to learn from each other. We have much to learn from our Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Confucianist, and indigenous religions. And if we listen to all of the voices, we CAN change the world. We can bring all of Creation to a place where the hate that caused this week’s attack will have no place to grow.

The Presiding Bishop has called us all to another way. Let us all do our part to eradicate non-acceptance of others and their way of life. We can begin a transformation of the human heart, and we can do it

right here. In a few weeks, we will be celebrating diversity right here in Page. I urge all of you to begin that celebration right now.

It is true that things will never be the same for any of us after this week. But it is also true that it is up to us to decide how it will never be the same and how we will change. Let us bring about that change from the heart, our own, our neighbor's, and the world's.

Amen.