

Remembering 9/11: Is Peace a Possibility?

Matthew 5:9, John 14: 27

Today is the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. We mark, in our worship, that significant anniversary of one of the most important events of our lives. That event had a profound effect on our society and on our world. Not coincidentally, “Ask Jack” question today very appropriate: “What is your theodicy and how did you come to your theodicy?”

What is a theodicy, anyway? Theodicy concerns the concept of justice and God. How is God just considering state of our world? There are many ways to ask that question. “Why do bad things happen to good people?” “What did I do to deserve that?” “What does suffering reveal about God and us?” “What expectations do we have for God’s justice?” “How are those realized or unrealized?”

There are different views of divine justice in Bible. Most of us are familiar with stories of God’s retribution: banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden, wiping out earth’s population with Noah’s flood and destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. There are stories of God blessing the Holy wars of Israel and also of Israel’s defeats and banishment into exile for idolatry. Even the New Testament has some retributive elements, such as the story of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for trying to deceive the apostle Peter and trying to withhold their gifts of money to the church in Acts. And of course, there is the material in the book of Revelation with its cataclysmic battle between evil and good..

There is another form of justice present all through Bible. It just doesn’t get as much notice, at least not until Jesus. This view reflects a view of God that is very different from most other near Eastern gods. It is God’s justice as distributive justice, a God whose justice reflected by Walter Brueggemann’s definition that justice is, “finding out what belongs to whom and giving it back to them” (from *Finally Comes the Poet*).

In Leviticus, when you wrong someone, you are required to make reparations—returning full amount of what you took, plus an additional 20%! That would be to repair the broken relationship with another person. In the gospel story, the tax collector Zacchaeus went beyond the requirement of the law by offering to restore four times as much as he may have taken unjustly from others in order to restore relationship. On top of that, the Law required you to make a sacrifice, a religious offering, to restore relationship with God. Biblical justice requires that we pay attention to restoring both human and divine relationships.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of God’s distributive justice is found in a series of Sabbatical laws culminating in the Year of Jubilee. Every seventh year, all debts would be cancelled. Every fiftieth year, everything is reset in terms of possessions: debts cancelled, slaves and prisoners freed, and all land returned to the original owners since God had given the land to people as a divine gift—a giant do over! So I ask myself, “Is distributive justice really just?” If I don’t think it’s just, then I might find myself in the uncomfortable place of opposing God’s justice. Jesus personified this justice. He said that everything belongs to God and its results are love and peace, peace and love.

What we understand as just seems to be tempered by our expectations and our experience. In response to the question about my theodicy, I’m not sure I really have a theodicy. What I do have is a story. Looking back on my life from its beginning until today, there has been some injustice and some unfairness. To tell the truth, however, I have probably been more unjust to others than they were unjust to me. I remember relationships that I did not handle well, actions of mine that I would change if I had the chance. Those experiences have helped teach me what I really value and the kind of person I want to be.

The death of my mother in an automobile accident, just before Christmas in 1982, seemed grossly unjust to me. That experience brought to the surface a struggle between my anger at the universe, at God, for letting this happen, and an equal fear that if I why or complain too loudly, I might lose a vital part of my life—my faith. I lived in the struggle for a long time—

how God's goodness had always been tied to my being shielded from the worst of life's losses and how that simple faith had been shattered by my mother's death. Gradually, I came to a place of new understanding that loss really does happen to everyone and that God is also good in a fundamental way. That process has guided, or maybe pushed, a great deal of my ministry, and certainly my love of honest questioning. The loss of my mom helped break me open and a lot of new life has come in for me.

There have been other losses which have led me to where I am—how I understand the goodness of God and what feels like a basic unfairness in life. I can only say these things are just part of living. On the day my mother died, there were undoubtedly thousands of people who died in the world. The realization that I was not alone in my loss was somehow comforting—at least a little.

My wife Kathy has had cancer and chemotherapy twice. We have struggled with infertility and, when I was in the country of Colombia adopting our daughter Lisa, our hotel room caught on fire. Most of our possessions were lost. Both Kathy's mom and my dad suffered from, and eventually died, as a result of having Alzheimer's disease. In each circumstance, what brought a measure of comfort and healing was the awareness of a community surrounding us, surrounding me. This community has included family and loved ones, caring and concerned friends, sisters and brothers in faith, and sometimes the sense of a "cloud of witness" surrounding me from beyond this life. In that community, each time and each experience, God's presence and support were real, were tangible. The result was always a measure of growth, of healing, and of wholeness.

These experiences have given birth on my journey to a growing passion for justice as I understand it in terms of my faith. Whenever I asked God, or the universe, Why me? Why this? Why now? The response always includes the challenge, "What will you do?" In my life and on my journey, and with the inspiration and guidance from authors such as Brueggemann, King, Wink, Fox, Borg, and O'Connor, I have decided that justice is more about distribution than retribution—that injustice really does affect me even when I'm not seeing it or feeling it. I have decided, as a tenet of faith, that life is essentially One—that we are connected with one another in God. The suffering of each affects all of us. The joy of each belongs to all. The greed and destructive behavior of some is destructive to all of us and there is no way toward the ideal of shared life other than to work for the common good.

Without being clear about just why or how, it seems to me that our experiences of injustice, unfairness, suffering, and loss actually provide a pathway for our growth. They are like the doorways through which we must pass in order to find that deeper quality of living that Jesus called abundant. Just as our faith sees God meeting us at the point of brokenness, in the cross, so we find our oneness when we meet each other at the point of our shared experience of injustice, pain, and loss.

Probably like most of you, I've become a collector of truths that seem to have the glow of eternity about them. They have become touchstones for me, foundations on which I build my theology. The first time I read Brueggemann about Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, I became convinced about the centrality of justice, compassion, and peacemaking to the Bible—and to Jesus' faith in God. Learning from other Christian scholars and also from those who have written from the perspectives of other faith and of science, I believe that faith is larger than theology. It includes a quality of mystery, mysticism, and even a fair amount of confusion and even ignorance about life's meaning. Yet, life continues to beckon us forward, and we follow. In my life, I follow without fear because I believe that my whole journey—our whole journey—happens within the life and providence of God who will never forsake us. That is the core. That is the key.

Little is clearer in the Christian scriptures than our call to be lovers of one another, workers for justice, and makers of peace. This is a vital way for how we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The question for me today is not whether a just God can allow

injustice or a truly powerful God allow some to dominate or exploit others. Clearly it happens all the time. It even happens within the church and as the result of choices people of faith make. Just as clearly, the thrust of our faith is that we are called to challenge that injustice and change the world toward the God's dream of *Shalom*, of peace and compassion and justice.

The promise of our faith is that, when we take the risk of stepping out, taking action, and choosing to believe that such peace is possible, then God's Spirit works in us and, through us, to transform evil into good. So, is peace really a possibility? The cynic in me doubts it because there is so little sign of true peace happening in the world. But unless I decide to risk believing, I will never act on that belief. Until we risk believing, we may never act for peace. Author Neale Donald Walsch wrote about shaping our own lives with these words.

What you hope, you will eventually believe,
what you believe, you will eventually know,
what you know, you will eventually create,
what you create, you will eventually experience,
what you experience, you will eventually express,
what you express, you will eventually become. (*Home with God*, 115)

I don't know where you are when it comes to making peace in your life, in your home, in this congregation, community, or society. I don't know if you even consider it a possibility to embrace justice, and work for it, in the sense that Jesus taught and worked for it. I look back on the journey I've walked and see where hope has moved to knowledge, then to belief and to creation, at least in some areas. I am aware that the justice and peace I've been able to create has come back to me in terms of my experience of grace. And so, I find myself expressing that experience, that belief, that hope to you today—and in the desire that we can become a place of justice and of peace in this community and in this world today.

Wherever you are on your journey, the path to peace and justice begins with forgiveness. We need to forgive ourselves for past injustices, make reparations when possible, and restore relationship with God. We need to forgive those who have wronged us, whether the terrorists of 9/11 or the authority figure who treated you so unfairly in the past.

Wherever you are on your journey, you are encouraged, you are invited, and you are welcomed at the table. Your participation in the making of peace is crucial. Your presence in the realization of justice is absolutely vital. Peace is a possibility. It starts here and now and all of us are needed.