

**“The Shaking of the Foundations”**  
**Luke 14:1-10**

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It has been said that each soul is like a battlefield and the most important wars are always fought there first of all and last of all. If that is true, our hearts have inwardly mirrored the outward tragedy, which we have come to know all too well.

Not a one of us has escaped the roller coaster of powerful emotions that has brought forth the best in us and the worst in us. So it is when people are thrust into an unthinkable, dastardly, shattering calamity. And that such a tragedy would be intentional, well, that rubs salt into the gaping wound.

Which one of us has not reeled from day to day, hour to hour, when we witnessed what seemed to be something off a motion picture set. So much terrible human suffering. So much terror and fear and confusion and grief and helplessness. And then, when we discovered the infamy of it all, the pure evil, there was hardly anything left but blind rage and hurt.

How in the world could a person, group or movement hate us intensely enough to commit mass murder of innocent civilians? On the political or cultural or religious level it is complex but not impossible explain. And certainly in the future we will need to dedicate much more energy to the exploration of those issues.

An act of terror is always motivated by anger, fear, and desperation. And in this case a religious ideology. Its purpose is to create the same kind of terrible feelings in the victims. In these days immediately following the atrocity, we all experienced exactly that. But not only that. On the surface our violators succeeded:

They took life, they destroyed national symbols, they proved that we were more vulnerable than we thought, they disrupted commerce and travel and communications and family life. Yes, on those levels they succeeded. They took advantage of our free society and executed a remarkable plan. But how little they really know about us.

What we also have witnessed and even felt rising within our own spirits is heroism, courage, compassion, resolve, solidarity, faith and even hope. To be sure, we mourn and grieve. But unlike the twin towers, we shall not collapse. From under the debris of calamity a tender green shoot is already pushing its way up to the surface. And it will not be hindered.

Will we address security issues in a world now unsafe in different ways? Of course.

Will we seek justice in the face of tyranny? We believe we will.

Will we strive to contribute to the increase of peace and harmony in the world, eliminating oppression – even our own – wherever it is humanly possible? It is our fervent hope.

Will we respond in ways that will not cause yet more evil and more suffering of the innocent? That is yet to be seen.

What is unexpected here, what was totally unanticipated by the murderers, is the moral fiber of our nation. And that fiber, when it is at its best, is wrapped and bound by the religious bonds of hope and trust in God.

Now we are faced with the daunting reality of our own freedom. We are totally free to respond to this tragedy in a multitude of ways. And the shaking foundations within us keep us oscillating from one to another.

On the one hand we could descend into our lower natures and come to resemble the very enemy we deplore. We could sink in the quicksand of hatred and stay there. It is possible that we could permanently mistrust every Middle Eastern looking person, and even treat innocent persons hatefully because they fit a certain profile. Our fear could do that.

In the words of the Prayer of St. Francis, could we become an instrument of God's Peace? That is a hard question to answer, especially now.

We can hold every passenger on every doomed plane, every worker in the crumbling, blazing building, every firefighter or rescue worker or survivor or average American glued to the TV in prayer. But how can we become an instrument of God's peace now?

You see, it is easy to become an agent of God's peace when all around us is harmonious. The test of our spiritual metal comes in the time of trial.

I've heard it said that being a Christian makes such times so much more bearable, even survivable. And in one sense I think that is quite true. The power of God at work within us leads us in inscrutable ways – ways beyond our imagining.

But I also have to say that being a practicing Christian also makes things much harder. It is harder because of the moral dimensions of our faith – a faith that makes particular claims about God and sin and relation to neighbor, a faith that includes the particular teaching of Jesus. And that teaching does not necessarily make it easier to endure such a calamity. Let me give you an example.



On Wednesday we had a prayer service and at the close of the service we shared the Lord's Prayer together. We all did quite well, petition by petition – "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be done... Give us this day our daily bread." We even prayed loud and clear, "Forgive us our sins ... " But when the petition came, "... as we forgive those who sin against us," there was almost an immediate silence in the room. We choked on our own prayer because we couldn't pray it.

What this reminds us is that there is merit to praying universal prayers of the ages – not just what we are inclined to feel at the moment – because they lead us to pray what we need and must pray even when our heart is not in it. I'll keep trying to pray it until I *can* pray it.

But even more it reminds us how being a Christian does not necessarily make things easier for us. In fact, being a Christian is frequently at cross purposes with a huge quantity of what we are happening to feel at any given moment. One of the most important things about a religious tradition is that it reveals truth that is bigger than you are. We often have to grow into shoes that are too big for us.

I have to confess that the greatest struggle of these past few days for me – after dealing with the pure shock and grief – was how to reconcile my Christian faith with my feelings about the *animals* who did this. There were times when I knew how far away I was from God and just had to say to myself, "Wait until you can be faithful again." I even felt this distance in different places in my body, in my brain. Some animal, survival instinct that wanted to lash out was in competition with Jesus on the Cross saying, "Father forgive them, they do not know what they do."



No, if your religious faith is worth its salt, it not only brings you incredible consolation in times of trouble but also puts you in terrible moral conflict.

On the one hand my instinctual response was to think that nobody has seen suffering like this before. But then my faith awakened an awareness of people throughout the rest of the world who endure this scope of malicious violence all the time. And it is not episodal – it is constant and chronic. There are genocides out there. Now I will know some of what it is like, now that my glass cocoon of privilege has been shattered.

In a way, faith is making it easier and harder at the same time.

This week members of Interfaith Partnership gathered to plan an interfaith service of prayer, which will be held tonight at 7:00 p.m. at Salem United Methodist Church. It took some doing to find a place and time that acceptable to all. But I have to tell you that both the hardest and most hopeful thing was being together. There we were – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim – and there was that unspoken tension and suffering as the Muslim Imam joined in our deliberation. How painful it is for those of us who suspect radical Muslims of terror to trust. How painful it is for peaceful Muslims who are ashamed of the violence of their fanatical brothers, and frightened by the hatefulness of some in our community toward them, to meet with us.

You see, it might not be *better* but it certainly would be *easier* if we didn't feel any moral obligation from our faith to be peacemakers. We could just wash our hands of it and go down the road. But we don't have that option – not if we are practicing Christians.

And what about forgiveness? That is perhaps the hardest issue for us to address. There is little difference among individuals or groups or communities as they have to face the ones who have violated them. Regardless of the scope – whether it is those who lost family in Oklahoma City, or in Poland in one of the death camps in WW II, or in a drive-by shooting in St. Louis – the question remains: How and who shall determine whether forgiveness is possible?

For the Jew, forgiveness is tied to moral justice – and when proper confession of wrong and reparations are made, forgiveness is a possibility. For the Muslim, forgiveness is primarily an act of mercy by which one extends something the other doesn't deserve. For the Christian, forgiveness is rooted in the forgiveness offered by God to us, graphically known in our own violation and sin as we gaze upon Christ's cross. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer sets it up: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of those who sin against us." Is that possible?

What is not possible is for one person to tell another person when this should take place. Only the violated one decides when forgiveness is possible and offered. It is a moment of grace in which the spirit of non-forgiveness is taken away.

Even though we have the Christian teaching about forgiveness, you and I can never say to another, "Ok, now is the time for you to forgive." That takes place on God's timetable as a grace.

You see how much harder being a Christian makes things?

One's greatest hope could be that in the future, in a time beyond where we are right now, all parties will realize the destructiveness, fruitlessness and evil of all violence, oppression, greed and hate.



If justice means making relationships right and equitable again, and if forgiveness is the wiping of the slate in order that people can begin again by the grace of God, the best hope we could realize would be the appearance of both – justice and forgiveness. If we can hold both of those liberating powers in our hands simultaneously, you never know where we might end up.

I don't know, but God does. And we have to trust that.

When you think about it, the people who boarded those jets, or went to work in one of those buildings, or reported for rescue duty, and who died, had no idea that Tuesday was to be the last day of their lives. But then again, we don't know when the final bell will toll for us either. As surely as you and I are here today, we had better face that inevitability. We are not immortal. And when folks come to that realization in their lives it often sends them stumbling toward God. I pray that is the case for each person here today. Stumbling toward God. Lost ones stumbling into the arms of the Shepherd.