

The Waters of Peace

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Luke 19:42-43 “As he came near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

I frequently tell people that ministers get the best seats in the house for some of the great moments that this life has to offer. Every baptism is an adventure and a delight. As you well know, the words and blessings that we offer are frequently upstaged by squawking, squirming and adorable children, who are so cute when they let us hold them, and so entertaining when they don't want anything to do with us.

Weddings are one of my favorite things. I get to be one of the first ones to whisper reassuring words to the bride of how beautiful she looks, while reminding everyone not to lock their knees so no one keels over and we don't end up on America's Funniest Home Videos. Watching people exchange their vows and commit their lives to each other from three feet away is so precious. I am grateful for every one.

Funerals and Memorial services, as you can probably imagine, are some of the most difficult things to do. But they can also offer tremendous insight into this human experience; and have provided some of the most profound moments of my life.

For each event, but especially for weddings and funerals, the times that I can be extra special are the planning stages. The planning stages are when the stories come out. The laughter and the tears come freely, and they are allowed to flow with no reservation about propriety or shame. Those can be sacred moments, when families and fiancés reflect on the importance of a single event or story that they have shared, and then I get to listen as that story becomes a defining piece of a relationship or a life. We get a lot of credit here at UCG for doing good weddings and funerals; but the secret that we share is a very simple one. We tell the story as it was relayed to us, and we share what we all know and understand already; that *it is these simple life events that can make life sacred, cherished and beautiful.*

One of the best pieces of advice that I ever received about doing funerals and memorial services came from one of my first mentors, Bob Kemper. He said that it is important that we, as ministers, make sure to allow sometime before the service to do our own mourning for the deceased. Because if you're not careful, it can be easy to find yourself suddenly overwhelmed. But that is not our role. We are not called to be full participants in the sadness of the day. We are called to be shepherds through the darkest valleys. But sometimes that is a very difficult thing to do. Because, sometimes in our role as shepherd we end up separate from the flock; whether it is sitting alone at a wedding reception or only being acknowledged with a nod and a handshake at the end of a funeral. The shepherd can be a lonely role.

10 years ago today I was on my way to work at a church outside of Chicago. When I arrived at work, the second tower had been hit. My parents lived not far from the church, so I went home and watched, in real time, as the unthinkable happened, and the towers tumbled and fell. We held a hasty meeting of the clergy and threw open the doors to the sanctuary as a place to come and sit and pray and be. We put together a short service of reflection and scripture for the following day, and then we went home and sat in stunned silence as we all tried to process what it was that just happened. At church the next

day I played and sang the song that Amanda offered today, and it still gives me peace and comfort, and it still chokes me up a bit to hear it again. Psychologists will tell you that it is quite common for us to remember the anniversaries of any great loss or sadness that we have gone through, not just in our minds but in our hearts and our souls as well.

Which is one reason why this week is so tough on all of us. Because everyone has a story, or a thought on the 10 year anniversary of that September day.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has named six stages of grief people go through following a serious loss. They are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance. Most psychologists believe that this is not an orderly process that people go through, but that these emotional reactions are pieces of the grieving process.

As we watch our nation mourn, and we all continue to try to make sense of the tragedy we went through, you will see many of these stages of grief come out. The memorials and the stories and the images have an amazing power. It is the personal stories of tragedy and triumph that draw us in, and bring us together. But there is also the dark side of the unfolding tragedy; the disturbing trends towards polarization and isolation and anger that can be even more disturbing. Yes, we came together to comfort and to mourn in those difficult days to follow; but the drumbeats for war called us to dance even before the flames went out.

Fast forward to one year ago, and recall the three ring circus that Gainesville had become, because of the Dove World's threatened burning of the Qur'an.

It turns out that I still had some emotional healing to work through, and that step that I wrestled with? Anger. My anger began to consume me. I was a wreck. I couldn't sleep at night. I paced my office like a tiger in a cage. On one hand, I was enraged that such an uninformed view of Islam could exist. And that such evil was being said and believed by some, AND that that misinformed voice was being given a worldwide microphone.

On the other hand I saw in this event all the things that make me sick about how our nation has reacted in the days since that tragic September day. I hate how all that anger and hatred and polarization has become such a dominant voice.

I hate that our town was somehow cast as a representative of all that is wrong with the post 9-11 world. In every interview given by ANYONE related to Gainesville everyone made a very specific point to say, "This is NOT representative of us!"

While it might not have been representative of us, it was representative of some of us.

I know that there are still those people out there that think that those 19 men who hijacked those planes somehow represent the essence of Islam. I know that there are people who will not sit next to an olive toned man on a city bus. I know that there are people who flinch when they see a woman in a headscarf, or hear a Muslim call to prayer. I also know that there are many who believe that Islam is a

religion of fear and hatred, instead of a religion of peace, which is what Islam means, and what it stands for.

But fear and misunderstanding have a frightening way of becoming commonly held beliefs. And as a nation, I am afraid that we have become uncomfortably tolerant of misinformation. But my biggest fear is that large and looming question; did we get stuck in our grief as a nation? Are we destined to be this angry forever?

If only we had recognized on that day a decade ago the things that make for peace.

As I prepared for this sermon this summer, I thought of all the things in my life that make for peace. I thought of backyard swings and walks in the woods; times of peace are times when beauty and nature combine to whisk me away to another reality where I could be at one with all around me, and I was at peace.

But this is not the peace the Jesus is speaking of when he weeps over Jerusalem.

The way of peace is not an escape. It is not passive, or completely personal. It is active. It is engaged. Peace is not simply bucking up and bearing through this great tragedy that befell our nation; peace is working to care for those most in need, reaching out to those pushed to the fringes; dispelling false notions of fear and hatred and replacing them and meeting them head on with love and truth. Peace is learning to work through all the anger and the denial and the isolation and the fear; and peace is sharing that with others and fighting for it with some. Peace is what we fight for, when the promises of Gods care and concern for all are jeopardy of being forgotten.

Imagine how different this world might look if we had recognized on that day the things that make for peace, and we had actively sought it out together, as a people.

Last September 11th was a day of relief for me. Our prayers were answered, and no Qur'an was burned in Gainesville. But that was only the beginning of my recovery. Those crucial first steps that brought our town together could have erupted if we had let the anger sickness consume our souls. But we didn't. Instead we opened ourselves up to one another; we shared together in the triumph of love over hate, but we also reached out to each other. We broke bread together; and we committed our hearts and our hands to work together, to make the world a better place. And today we get to celebrate hope! Today we celebrate how far we have come! Today we get to celebrate that we have learned what it means to work towards peace, and we celebrate that we took active steps to achieve that peace for everyone.

Today, I get the best seat in the house, again. And I get to see the gathered interfaith community smile at the doorstep to the home that we built together. And we get to celebrate *this simple life event that makes life sacred, cherished and beautiful*. Together.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen