

A Time To Heal, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 17050911
(Originally preached 9/16/01 at Vine Street Christian Church, Nashville, TN)
Psalm 46 and Romans 5:1-11
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 11 September, 2005

Our original plans for today's worship were to commemorate the terrible disaster of September 11, 2001. In the meantime, another disaster has struck, that of hurricane Katrina devastating the Gulf Coast. The first was human-caused, the second a combination of nature- and human-caused. In both, many tragically lost their lives, their livelihood, or their loved ones. So today, recognizing our common humanity with those who suffer from both disasters, we come together before God.

It was exciting to live in New York in the late Nineteen Sixties and early Seventies. I loved the hustle and bustle of people moving along the sidewalks and even got used to being levitated onto packed subway cars by the crowds during rush hour. I was excited to watch the new twin towers of the World Trade Center growing upward into the New York skyline.

But, what excited me most about New York City was to be a part of the diverse people living and working together. There were turbaned Sikhs, red-dotted Indians, Afro-coiffed and dashikied Blacks, saffron-robed Buddhists and braided-haired wide-brim-hatted Hasidic Jewish boys as well as brief-case toting vest-suited businessmen and businesswomen. I enjoyed eating a meal in China Town, walking the streets of Little Italy, working in Hispanic Iglesia Christiana La Hermosa, and living in West Harlem, just two blocks from the Apollo Theater. New York City is a place that has always opened its arms to welcome anyone, especially the poor, the weary, the dispossessed and those seeking a better way of life. It was into this diverse New York City that I brought my new bride thirty-four years ago.

There are some, however, who cannot bear to see diverse peoples living together in peace and unity. Twelve years ago, I watched in dismay as Serbian guns destroyed the city of Sarajevo, the symbol of Serbs, Croats, and Muslims living together in unity and freedom. For decades we have seen the bombs planted by those who cannot abide Catholic and Protestant children playing with each other in Northern Ireland. In November, 1995 a member of the Gush Emunim ("the Bloc of the Faithful) killed Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin who believed that Palestinians and Jews could live together peaceably in Israel.

There are some, who when they feel threatened by diversity, recede into small simple religion and construct God in their own image. These become the small-minded religious fundamentalists of any religious stripe whose God is too small to include such a diversity of people.

In these days of tragedy and heroism, religion is both a help and a part of the problem. The religious fall back on hymns and holy books for strength and solace. As religious people, we fall back on the words of the Psalmist, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea."¹

God is our refuge-- not building security systems, sky marshals or metal detectors. God is our strength. Religion can fill the courageous with strength to carry a disabled worker down sixty-five flights of stairs or to continue picking through rubble beyond the point of normal hope. Religion filled a Muslim with compassion to keep his deli open all night long at his own cost to feed those relief workers.

Unfortunately, in times of stress, people can allow their gods to bless their hatreds and consecrate their fears. Thus, religious fundamentalists can call Americans a godless people, or worse, the "Great Satan." Likewise, in times of stress, the religious of this land can demonize a whole religious group or ethnic minority. "If they don't worship my god in my way, if they don't dress the way my god says to dress, then my god says, 'send' 'em back to where they belong.'" Yes, this is a world with devils filled, as Martin Luther said, but we must take care that the devils are not we ourselves.²

As this world grows smaller, we need a bigger God, a God who creates all people in God's image. God does not bless retaliation or murder for murder. As we talk about punishment, we had better be sure

¹Psalm 46:1-2

²From the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" by Martin Luther

we have the blessing of most every other nation on earth, because acting on our own, we will end up only punishing ourselves.

As this world grows smaller, we need a bigger God. Muslims, Christians, and Jews are children of Abraham, and therefore children of God. Christianity is *our* faith, but God is bigger even than Christianity. Our God *must* be bigger than that. If Jesus showed us anything, he showed us that God is the father of Samaritan, Gentile, Roman and Jew. He showed us that God is the mother of the adulterous woman, the tax collector, leper, and child.

As we worship this God of all humanity, we will find our refuge and strength. We will not give in to the terror that terrorists hoped to create. In confident hope, we will continue living our lives in love, compassion, and service. Although we cannot go to Washington, New York, and now New Orleans to provide direct relief, there is much to be done here. Although blood donors are being turned away *this* week because the turnout is so great, there will be a need to donate *next* week and the week after. Although we cannot pick through the rubble of destroyed buildings, we can build buildings right here for Habitat for Humanity. Our children still need to be nurtured and loved. Residents of retirement centers and nursing homes still need to be visited and ministered to. Members of the Islamic community need to be accepted and protected: accepted as worshipers of the one great God, and protected from those who in anger would do them harm.

This is the religion of a bigger God. As is written in the book named after James the brother of Jesus, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."³

Look around you this morning. Look and see your brothers and sisters. See the strength we have together in the name of God who calls all people his children. Look around you this morning and see the faces of those who need your love, your support, and your care. Each one of us has the power to heal the world. Each one of us has been given the flame of the gospel of God's love. It is up to each one of us to let that gospel light shine to others.

The poet W.H. Auden, in the darkest of days of the last century wrote a poem entitled "SEPTEMBER 1, 1939" that is eerily appropriate for this week of the twenty-first century.

I sit in one of the dives/
On Fifty-second Street/
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire/
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear/
Circulate over the bright/
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;/
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.
Into this neutral air/
Where blind skyscrapers use/
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man./
Each language pours its vain/
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long/
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare/
Imperialism's face/
And the international wrong. . . .
The windiest militant trash/
Important Persons shout/
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote/
About Diaghilev/
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone/
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love/
But to be loved alone. . . .
All I have is a voice/
To undo the folded lie, /
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street/
And the lie of Authority/
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State/
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice/
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.
Defenseless under the night/
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light/
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:/
May I, composed like them /
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same /
Negation and despair, /
Show an affirming flame."

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!

³ James 1:27