

Faith Mennonite Church  
September 11, 2011  
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Becoming Perfect in Love  
*Revelation 22:1-5; Matthew 5:43-48*

Today marks the 10-year anniversary of the most traumatic national event our country has experienced in our generation. Nevertheless, most of us here today probably have other events, other personal tragedies closer to home that are more indelibly marked in our individual psyches. As a congregation, the deaths of Lisa Stauffer Wengerd, a little over a month before September 11, 2001, and of Mike Schrock in 2008, were events that profoundly affected us and continue to shape us.

The attack of September 11 was a unique event. It wasn't like the "natural" disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and forest fires that decimate communities, or the cancers, heart attacks, and dementias that have stolen some of our loved ones—events that don't have a clear perpetrator. September 11 was different; there *were* people to blame. The tragedy was a premeditated, planned. Those who attacked wished to hit symbols of western capitalism. It is beyond most of our understanding how they could be so hardened, so calloused to the toll in human lives that their symbolic act would have; lives of people from many nations and many religions. Ironically, the World Trade Center, which appeared to be a monolithic symbol of western capitalism, was filled with the great diversity of humanity. Each person who died that day was an individual with a story, someone with a family, an extended family, a community.

And because of the great human loss, the whole world, it seemed, reached out in compassion and solidarity. Candles burned in night-time vigils. And because there were perpetrators to blame, perpetrators who were fanatically willing to take their own lives for the cause, the national mood quickly moved from awed sadness and lament to anger, fear and revenge. That was and is a dangerous mix.

Within a little over a year, our country's military was invading Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, ten years later, the devastation of September 11 is dwarfed by the human toll of eight years of war in which hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, primarily civilians, have died (estimates range from 100,000 to 1 million) and over a million civilians have fled the country as refugees. Over 5,000 US military personnel have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and 30,000 more have been wounded. The monetary cost of these wars is over 3 trillion dollars and is directly related to our current economic woes.<sup>1</sup>

Columnist Andrew Sullivan, in an article in the current issue of Newsweek, asks, "Did Osama win?" Despite the fact that our leaders took the bait and marched off to war, Sullivan concluded that no, "Bin Laden and his henchmen failed." Rather, it was "our own fear [that] won. Fear stopped us, overwhelmed us, as our rationality deserted us. But fear is a tougher enemy than mere mistakes. It can only be overcome by hope." Hope, Sullivan wrote, "is a choice, not a fate. Until we decide to grasp hope again, the war will live on."

Where do we find hope? How do we choose and grasp hope? Hope doesn't seem to be as instinctive as fear, but it can be learned and shared, even to the point of contagion. Our scriptures this morning suggest that hope dwells where there is a vision. The prophet Isaiah, speaking out

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<sup>1</sup> About.com, based on statistics from the Brookings Institution.

of a situation of exile, shared a vision. His vision was of a mother-like God nursing, carrying and dandling her loved ones close to her, bringing them comfort. Jesus had a vision. His vision was of God's children possessed by love, a love that works for the good even of the enemy. Jesus didn't go around holding out a future hope, in fact, hope was not a word that the gospel writers record Jesus using. But he said over and over, the kingdom is here; the kingdom is now. We live the love we want to come; we practice the peace we want in our world. And the apostle John, also in a situation of exile, saw a vision. John's vision was of God's presence running through the city as a river, bringing healing through the leaves of the trees that grew next to the river. When we gather to listen and to affirm these visions again and again, as we have today, we choose and grasp hope.

We choose and grasp hope as we remain in community—and invite others into a community dedicated to love of enemy. Those of us who were here in 2001 will recall that our annual fall all-church retreat was the weekend following September 11. I do not recall the theme or the resource person for that retreat. Two things, however, do stand out in my memory. First is how Dean & Gwen Preheim-Bartell (who have since moved back to Indiana) arrived from Red Wing, expressing how important it was to come and be part of a community that would pray for peace and not be filled with the fear and vengeance that Gwen had already begun to hear expressed in her work setting, just days after the attack. And I remember Leslie Bardo playing a lament on her violin during our Sunday morning worship, allowing us to grieve together as an entire community; to cry rather than to fear.

We choose and grasp hope as we share stories of hope. Gerald and I were at Mennonite Central Committee headquarters in Akron, PA, in early August at the time of the one-year anniversary of the death of MCC worker Glen Lapp in Afghanistan. I happened to be in the office the day the staff members paused for a brief time of remembrance for Glen, who was nearing the end of his three-year term, when he and a health team were killed in an ambush in a remote part of the country. One of the MCC officials who kept in close contact with the Lapp family during the year since Glen's death shared that Glen's mother Mary had decided to travel to Afghanistan to mark the one-year anniversary of his death. She was stepping out in hope and love rather than fear. He also shared that several of the Amish families from Nickel Mines, whose children had been killed in the shooting five years ago, made a commitment to accompany the Lapp family during their first year of grief. They would get together from time to time to share stories and experiences. These families, who modeled forgiveness in the immediate aftermath of their great tragedy, shared their hope with another family in pain.

For the past two years Donna Minter has been sharing a story of hope in the Twin Cities. This week she and Elaine Zook-Barge from Eastern Mennonite University will lead the third Minneapolis training in Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR). This program was developed to respond to the deep trauma in New York City following September 11, 2001. In the past ten years it has helped bring hope to communities traumatized by natural and human disasters around the world. We share the stories and teach the methods of healing and hope.

As Christians, we choose and grasp hope as we allow the Spirit of Christ to dwell more fully in us, as we pray for our enemies and for the healing of communities here in our city and around the world. In a moment Adam will lead us in a hymn that is a prayer for healing. As we sing, I invite any who wish, to come receive anointing with oil, as a prayer for healing and hope in your own life or for another person or situation that concerns you. Candace Lutt will join me in offering oil and prayer. As you come, you are welcome to briefly express your desire for healing or hope, or come in silence. Let us prayerfully sing.