

From the Heart

Sermon notes for the sermon
Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young
On Sunday, September 11, 2011

On Sunday, November 24, 1963, in the early afternoon I was playing outside with a friend after church. My father came out of the house to inform us that Jack Ruby had just murdered Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald had been arrested two days earlier for the assassination of President Kennedy. My friend and I started jumping for joy and shouting in celebration. My dad stopped us and said, "A man's death is nothing to be happy about. The two of you need to stop that right now." In the moment and with those words my dad taught me to have respect for all life; even the lives of those that we do not like.

On Monday, March 30, 1981, in the early afternoon President Reagan was shot by John Hinckley, Jr. At the time I heard the news I was in my church office and quickly shared it with the Senior Pastor of the church. I will never forget his words, "Those who take the sword will perish by the sword." I thought it was an odd response but one that caused me to think deeper about life and God's creation. These were the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was arrested. His disciples were ready to fight to the death but Jesus had chosen another path; a path of non-violence that would lead to the cross.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was in my church office early in the morning when I received a call from the church organist telling me to

turn on the television. She had just heard of the plane that crashed into tower one of the World Trade Center and was, like most everyone else, thinking that it was an accident. I managed to get one of the church's TV's set-up in time to see tower two hit. The church secretary and I could not stop watching the events unfold like a bad dream. We were stunned, heartbroken, angry, sad, wanting revenge on whoever would do such acts of terror.

That day and night and for the rest of the week the church sanctuary was open for prayer and I remember one man, the chairperson of our church council, coming each day and praying for hours. That next Sunday our worship service was packed as was every other church in this nation. I thought to myself that this act of terror has brought us to our knees and we are finally stopping to invite God into the equation of our personal, community and national lives. Two Sundays after 9/11 worship attendance was back to normal and I thought to myself what does it take to bring us back to God? Even a national tragedy of the magnitude of 9/11 hasn't done it. I was shocked and at a loss for words. One image continues to haunt me to this day. President Bush announced during the days that followed that America will hunt down whoever did this to us. "We will hunt them down." Hunt them down.

During Lent of 2004, Bishop Devadhar invited the clergy of our conference to do something I had never experienced. He invited us to turn to someone seated near us and say, "If I have harmed you or offended you in any way I apologize and ask for your forgiveness." It was a

powerful moment for me. It just so happened that the person sitting in front of me had years before done something that had hurt me and I had never shared it with her. She turned to me, offered an apology, and asked for forgiveness. It was for me a time of healing. She, I believe still does not know the hurt that she had caused me but that simple, single gesture initiated by Bishop Devadhar provided the opportunity for healing to come to my soul.

The Sunday before the Eastern Orthodox season of Lent begins I receive a phone call from my oldest son's father-in-law, Dr. Nick. Dr. Nick is a cardiologist and the choir director of the Russian Orthodox Church to which he belongs. He calls me on the Sunday before Lent and says, "Greg, if I have wronged you in any way during this past year, I repent of my wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness." Simple and yet powerful words that are repeated every year with heartfelt sincerity and the intention of getting one's soul right with God and right with those around us.

What happens when you have been wronged and the one who has wronged you does not repent? Do you continue to carry the burden of what lies between the two of you? Do you try to forget only to find yourself remembering at the worst times? Or, do you attempt to find a way for repentance and forgiveness to come? If repentance never comes how can we get to forgiveness? I know people who have written letters to deceased family members in an effort to bring healing and peace to relationships that now only live in the memory. I know people who ask a friend to play the part of the unrepentant

one in an effort to bring healing and peace. The question is do we allow hurt, pain, suffering and brokenness to define who we are or do we seek to find the healing grace of God which seeks to define us a a people of grace and peace? It is totally in our hands. When we are wronged we can choose to take the route of finding a weapon (whether it be words, sticks, guns or nuclear warheads) and exacting revenge or we can choose to look our adversary in the eye and say let's talk; let's work together to find the grace and peace that will bring healing to us. It is scary business and often times we turn to violence to solve our hurts and pains or we simply choose to ignore it. As Jesus knew and understood and embodied the deeper healing comes when we choose to be defined by grace rather than by revenge or ingratitude.