

In Times of Trouble and Distress

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, October 24, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, your word has called us here once again to gather in this sacred place. To draw near to the symbols of our faith that reminds us of your goodness and mercy and your grace; and to draw near to one another for you have given us each other for the journey of life; the journey of faith. We're grateful for our brothers and sisters. We ask your blessing upon our children as they go to their Sunday school classes this morning and we pray your blessing upon their teachers as they are guides to our children. Bless us now and I ask this in the name of your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sermon:

The New Brunswick community has witnessed some devastating events, tragic events in these past few weeks. We've all been deeply touched by the tragic death of Tyler Clementi and the way that he reached the end of his rope of being teased, being ridiculed and embarrassed in having his life paraded before students and the public. His private life invaded and exposed. The tragedy of feeling he was all alone and had no one to turn to. Perhaps he reached out in his own way, but no one heard his cries for help. They went unheeded. And it drove him to a point of jumping off the George Washington Bridge. The student body here at Rutgers is still in shock; still stunned by that tragic story. And then to add to that the tragedy of Eric LeGrand last weekend; an accident on the football field where he is today paralyzed from the neck down.

They are events that deeply touch us. They are events that have deeply touched the student body and faculty and staff of Rutgers. They are events that cause us to ask questions. Why? Why would a God allow such things to happen? Why wasn't there any one to help? Why couldn't someone of interceded? Why? Why?

To me one of the saddest stories that we have in scripture is the story of Judas taking his own life before he realized, before he knew that God loved him too. And that the forgiveness that God offers to all in Jesus would have been extended to him as well. Perhaps that sad story was too much for the early church and a legend grew up around Judas that after he had taken his own life and there he was in the place of the dead. Suddenly Jesus appears and holds Judas in his arms and instead of Judas giving the kiss of death to Jesus; it is Jesus giving the kiss of life to Judas.

The prophet Joel lived during a time of Israel's history when the people were living through a nightmare of famine. The wonderful, beautiful rich crops that dotted the countryside of Israel had been destroyed by a swarm of locusts. And Joel calls it the army of locusts that came and devastated the crops and the people were left without food. We read those words but we really do not feel those words. Imagine your children literally starving to death because there is no food to feed them. Imagine your home being torn apart because of the anguish that comes with starvation. Imagine the hopelessness, the feelings of utter despair that walked the streets of Israel during this time of famine. It's no wonder that the people felt that God had abandoned them; that God was not around; God really didn't care. Why, oh, why, O God have you done this to us? Where, O God, are you? Help us. Help us, O Lord.

Feelings that are similar to those going through the Rutgers community, the New Brunswick community, probably throughout our land, as they reflect on the events that have touched our lives. Not just two isolated events but events that occur throughout the world and we hear about it on our television news broadcasts; we hear Russ telling us this morning about the cholera outbreak in Haiti. Isn't there enough devastation in Haiti? Why, O God? Why?

God sent Joel the prophet to a people who had lost all hope and who had abandoned their faith. And he sent Joel to them in an effort to bring a voice of hope where hopelessness reigned. And so, Joel called his people in the midst of their suffering, in the midst of their trouble and distress; he called out to his people in God's name and he proclaimed a fast for the Lord. A fast in the midst of starvation? A fast to the Lord? Perhaps that call to a fast was actually Joel saying look at this in another light and use your distress and your trouble the very fact that you cannot feed your households as a way to draw closer

to God for God is suffering with you. Perhaps Joel is helping his people to look at their troubles, to look at their situation in a different way.

And if indeed they are to suffer, Joel invites them to suffer for God; to go without food that they might be drawn closer to God; and that their faith might be strengthened as they are drawn closer to God. He invites them to pray even though the people feel their prayers have been ignored. Their prayers have gone unheard they believe by God. And he encourages them to pray. And he encourages his people to finally worship and praise God's holy name even though that's the last thing on their minds. He calls them to use the fasting, to use the prayers, to use the worship of God as a way to deepen and strengthen their relationship with God. Because who ultimately did they have in the end, but God? And so Joel encourages his people to deepen their faith through the Means of Grace that God has provided. The vehicles that God has given us that as we use them helps to strengthen and deepen our relationship with the divine so that when trouble comes, when distress is on our front doorstep we might have the tools to live through the tragedy, the tools to walk forward in life with our God at our side. And at times our God just holding and carrying us as our sisters and brothers carry us in their faith when we are going through struggles in life.

I spoke with a woman this week who shared with me a tragedy that touched me deeply. She had been married for just 13 years and she and her husband had three wonderful little children that blest their married life together. And one day as she was working in the store that she and her husband operated together, she received a call from her husband from the doctor's office. And he shared with her that the headaches that he had been having, his doctor was very concerned about these headaches and wanted to do further tests. And so he wouldn't be home at the time that he thought he would be but he would be home soon. Three days later they learned that the had an inoperable brain tumor that had been growing since he was a little boy and had gone undetected until then. Three weeks later, this woman was a widow. Left with three children to raise and wondering how am I going to move forward in my life.

She shared with me how one day she went to the grocery store. She left her three children with her mother as she drove to the grocery store. And then she was driving home and as she looked ahead down the street. At the end of the street she saw the river and she said the thought flashed through my mind, "I'm just going to keep driving until I make it

to that river and I'm going to drive right off into that river and be done with my trouble and be done with my distress." She looked at me and she said, "Rev, something stopped me from doing that and I'd like to think it was God. And now, forty-six years later I'm standing with you and I'm here to tell you that the only way I lived through that tragedy in my life was with my faith." And she said, "I didn't realize the faith I had until I found myself in this time of trouble and distress and suddenly, there it was." And she said, "Rev, I just don't know how people get through life without faith." She never married again. She raised her children; she loves her grandson. Life went on.

Oh, I wish I had the opportunity to talk with Tyler Clementi. I wish I could of sat with him and told him even in the midst of his ridicule and his shame and his embarrassment that God loved him. And God wanted so much for his life. Oh, how I pray for Eric LeGrand that this life-changing event that has taken place that he will find in the midst of it the God of hope, the God of promise and a new path for him to live and live fully and live boldly for our God. You see that's the message we bear as followers of Christ, that is the message that we have received. You know that message because you know your faith has sustained you through your trials in life. Through the very difficult time when you're threatened to come undone. You know your faith has gotten you through and there is a world outside that is so troubled and distressed that it needs that Good Word that we hold. And what's holding us back from sharing that word of God's grace with the Tyler Clementis and the Eric LeGrands. With all the hurting people of the world who right now feel all alone in their brokenness. All alone because someone is making fun of them or bullying them. All alone because they do not know the God of love and the God of grace.

My friends, today Joel reminds us that the voice with which he spoke is the voice God calls us to speak with as well. I invite you to live your faith just not within these walls and among your sisters and brothers, but live it boldly with the community and the people around you. Those strangers to whom you meet along life's way who desperately needs the word of hope for their lives, for their lives' sake.

Thanks be to God. Amen.