

(Luke 15:1-10 NRSV)

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

These Gathered Flowers

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Luke 15:1-10

Today my heart is broken. Today I feel the anguish of senseless and brutal loss of so many innocent people, people like you and I, who awoke Tuesday morning to go to work, to board airplanes, to begin another ordinary day, only to be thrust into a nightmare of unimaginable proportions. Today I know the agony of fear in my belly born from the evidence that the freedoms and the safety I have taken for granted are far more fragile and qualified than I had imagined. Today I am still numb, still taking in the enormity of what has befallen so many individuals and what has befallen us as a people and a nation. Today I still reel in a sea of feelings, feelings of rage and powerlessness, feelings of anger and sorrow, feelings of despair and vengefulness. Today, like the prophets of old, I am moved to tear my clothes in two, to moan in bitter woe, to let sobs pitch forth from my insides, and to let tears cover my face and wet the ground on which I stand. Today my heart is broken.

But today, thank God, I am not alone. I am among friends. I am among you, this bouquet of flowers gathered here this morning. Where one of us alone would lose our balance and fall over in the vase, together we support one another. Together we combine to become a community of possibility and hope in a time of deep grief and sadness. Today my heart is broken, but I thank God that we are here together, diverse individuals of many colors and shapes composing this beloved community on a day when we still stagger in terror and dread.

This community that we are is a great support for us. It is also a magnificent source of great wisdom for us.

First it is a source of wisdom in its very representation, in its many shapes and colors. It is a model for our national identity. It is in many ways a representation of the nation we are, as well as the church we are – many and varied, yet a beautiful vase together. Today this image of who we are as Americans is sorely tested. Jerry Falwell in a 700 Club interview with Pat Robertson blamed many of those who constitute significant parts of our bouquet for Tuesday's terror. He said:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'

Falwell's list is meant to blame and stigmatize anyone who differs from his religious views, to suggest there is no room for them in the flower arrangement of our society.

Over these last days I have talked with many Americans with international roots, many Americans who don't look American, whatever that means. And they are afraid. They are afraid

that they will be singled out and blamed and harassed or worse, simply because they look to someone like they don't belong in this bouquet.

And, of course, those who are experiencing the greatest fear just now are American Muslims and anyone who looks Middle Eastern. Michael Wolf is an American Muslim, and he writes:

In a few short days we have seen pigs' blood thrown at the door of a mosque in San Francisco, 300 marchers waving flags and shouting "USA" as they tried to descend on a mosque in Chicago, a madman wearing what looked like a bomb in the parking lot of a Muslim school in Silicon Valley, gunshots in Texas, and mosques vandalized in Washington D.C. Electronic hate mail has flooded the chat boards of ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN. (Example: "It's time to eradicate Islam.")

On the front page of the Islamic Society of Boston's website are 23 suggestions for American Muslims to help them stay safe. Just imagine for a moment what it would feel like if you had to go to the North-Prospect website to hear advice like, "Those who wear Christian attire should consider avoiding public areas," or, "Post members at the doors and the parking lot during prayer times."

These cautions are on the front page of the Islamic Society of Boston's website even though even more prominently on the site are words of condemnation of the terrorist attacks, and words with which the Islamic Society of Boston offers help and relief to those affected by the terrorism, just like every other church and religious group, and words which make it clear that they are Americans and like all Americans have been victims of this terror.

Jesus tells a parable of sheep. But this morning he might well have been telling us a parable of flowers. "Which one of you, having a hundred flowers and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that is lost." The lost in Jesus' parable are those who were despised, the tax collectors and others considered sinners by far too many in his society. But Jesus will not rest easy until they, even those most easily put to the fringes, are all included in the bouquet, until the full one hundred are there. Jesus won't settle even for 99%.

On Tuesday morning a count which likely reach several thousand people of every stripe, color, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and any other characteristic you can imagine died in an horrific attack. Every kind of American, and many others, too, were included. On Tuesday morning a great bouquet of humanity was violently taken from us. And now a like bouquet, a bouquet of the same broad composition, mourns their loss. And it will take that whole bouquet which is left, all 100% of it, gathered together in one blessed community of love and compassion and respect and working together if we are to have any hope whatsoever that our deep wounds will be healed.

*** This picture of the full bouquet which Jesus so often talks about is even bigger than it looks. And I think it challenges us. I know it challenges me. In this morning's story, Jesus was eating with outcasts. But in the passage from a couple of weeks ago, he was in different company. A couple of weeks ago we found Jesus eating dinner with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were against Jesus. They were his opponents. They played a significant role, according to the story, in his downfall. But Jesus actually always wanted to honestly win them over to the side of goodness. They never took his advice or listened to him much, but he kept trying and hoping that they would.

This side of Jesus leaves us with a rather stark choice. Either we must find him a hopeless optimist. Either we must consider Jesus to be just too precious, too naive, too pious, too idealistic, too cheery, too simplistic, or, or, we must presume that he was up to something important that we perhaps can understand.

In recent times you can see people wearing jewelry with the simple letters WWJD. It stands for, 'what would Jesus do?' WWJD. As a Christian it seems to me there are two options in considering that question. The first is to believe that the stories about Jesus are very nice, but you can't really live that way. You can't really turn the other cheek. You can't really walk the extra mile. You can't really love your neighbor, or even worse love your enemy. Jesus was very nice, but you can't really take those things too seriously, is one way to deal with those stories.

The other way, of course, is to suppose that Jesus must have been up to something important, since he seemed to keep telling these things over and over again.

Now, you can see where I'm heading. And I want to tell you, I don't want to go there any more than you do. This last week when the pain has been raw and torturous, when the frustration and powerlessness has been palpable, when I have seen, as you have, a huge number of innocent people massacred by a handful of heartless butchers, when I have seen my country, a nation of great freedoms and principles staggered by a few self-righteous lunatics, when I have seen our lives, all of our lives, altered by plain criminals, I have not wanted to hear, What would Jesus do? I have wanted to do what my outrage would allow me to do. I have wanted to justify my outrage, my righteous anger. I have not wanted to ask, What would Jesus do?

But we cannot come to this place, we cannot read from this great book, we cannot offer the prayers we offer and declare the beliefs we declare and fail to ask that very question. And as Christians we cannot but believe that the answer to that question is filled with wisdom, and truth and practicality. That is, as Christians we must in the final analysis believe that the answer to the question, What would Jesus do? actually works and that isn't just some pie in the sky thing reserved for quaint Sunday School lessons.

Martin Luther King has left us with so many words that are potent and sure answers to the question, What would Jesus do? Hear these from "Where Do We Go From Here?" Annual Report Delivered at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 16 August 1967, Atlanta, Georgia.

And I say to you, I have also decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love, I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.

If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we are moving against wrong when we do it,

because John was right, God is love. He who hates does not know God, but he who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.

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Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.' Let us go out realizing that the Bible is right: 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' This is for hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, 'We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.'

Oh there are so many good answers to this question of What would Jesus do? that I want to share with you this morning. Remember when Anne Frank had the strength to say, "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good inside." Or when Gandhi reminded us, "An eye for an eye and we'll all soon be blind." Answers given from the trenches, answers not hypothetical or theoretical, but answers delivered when the very future hinged on them.

What would Jesus do? There are so many good answers to inspire us. You know many of them. They are a reference point for us. Time and again their central meaning is promote love not hate.

And the truth is this: Today we face the question for ourselves in a way we have not for a very long time. We stand here among the sagas, the sayings and the symbols of our Christian faith. We stand here together, a group of individuals gathered into a vibrant bouquet of mutual support and care. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses – our memory and our hope, our anchor and our guide. And we are grateful to have them as we consider perhaps the most significant question we can ask ourselves in a time like this: What would Jesus do? And in light of that, What should I do? Amen.

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