



Hello Again

Rev. Dr. Susan Suchocki Brown

Sermon September 11, 2016

It is such a delight to look out from this pulpit, to which I was called in September 1992, and to see all of your faces. Some I have known for many years, some newer and some unknown whom I hope to see again and again. Welcome and hello again.

My call to serve as your minister and pastor will end on January 29, 2017 and we will take time in these next months to reflect on, by then going into our 25 years together. But today we say hello again and reconnect and recommit after the weeks away for summer vacation and breaks. The years I have been with you have been full of many events and it is ironic that on this our opening day of ingathering and saying welcome to newcomers, of sharing once again in a community with friends and neighbors, that it is the 15th Anniversary of 9-11.

My life in ministry, my call to ministry has been anything but ordinary and one of those memorable events was being called to Logan Airport on September 12 and 15th and to Ground Zero New York on September 16th–24th, [2001], when I was called to serve as part of the Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains. When I stood in the pulpit and told you that I was going with a group of 9 other Massachusetts Corp Fire Chaplains, we had already had a full week in Leominster. On 9-11 my neighbor at the Pilgrim UCC church and I arranged an interfaith vigil at City Hall, we opened the doors of the church on the 13th for an evening prayer service and during the first few days of that long and terrifying week we kept the church open and served soup and bread during the day. We opened our doors to our Muslim neighbors in Fitchburg, letting them know they could come here or to any of

our homes if they were feeling threatened. I had been in Boston on the 12th and the 15th as part of the Mass Corps and a Red Cross emergency response and then I got word that I would be leaving shortly after church service on the 16th to go to New York, to do- I did not know what.

I mean who of us knew what to do? But you knew that I was going to be in a very scary, terrifying place, with a burden on me that was tangible and awful, you knew that my spouse was anxious, you who were here were anxious too but **you did know what to do**. You knew that you were needed, to be holding me, my spouse, one another, our emergency workers, our country, our world in loving thoughts and you knew that you would look out for one another- I want you to know that your prayers and thoughts helped me get through some of the most challenging times in my entire life, not just ministry life, but entire life.

Today we come back together into this wonderful, glorious building- she is an ancient beauty who has weathered wars and terrorist acts, and time, and weather, and ministers coming and going. This building is not First Church of Leominster but this building allows us to become the best that we can be. What is that you wonder? It is that we are a place of connections. This is the theme to think about today as we reconvene, as we come into another church year, as we think about the future, and as we remember with sadness, pride, horror and grief the events of 9-11.

You see my theme today and it seems consistently to show up throughout my years of ministry is about connection, about resiliency, about relationships, about connections to each other and to the larger community that is sometimes wrought with danger and terror. Terrorism is the attempt to disarm and disable the human spirit and to make people so frightened of one another that they lose connection. Sadly, once these connections to humanity are cut the terrorist will have won. If I have any power at all, power of word, deed and faith in life I will not let terrorist then or now take away our basic trust in one another and in the world. Yes, there is evil in the world, yes evil acts are done and have been done since humans first took breath but when we act as if love is the best intention of our being we will not give up, we will not have lost.

I did a few interviews this past week in preparation for the 15th Anniversary. The Champion ran a great story about the Touchstone in the middle of the Common. I hope you get a chance to read that story. I also did an interview with the Telegram and Gazette, this article was published today. One of the

questions asked was if I had a memory to share. I answered Mark Sullivan from the Telegram with the following.

I have thousands of memories both large and small. And since this week's 15th anniversary has made its way into my consciousness I have taken many a travel down memory lane. Of course, the courage of the emergency personnel, the heart-wrenching death of the firefighters who walked into the bowels of hell to rescue as many people as they could, the persistence of the rescue crews, the police and port authority and the crew from the heavy equipment operators who had the gruesome task of digging in the rubble are always on my mind – God bless them and may they know they are held in love and respect always. All this is true but one story seems to keep coming up day after day for me. I had been working at the morgue at Ground Zero, it was supposed to be 8 hours but time is not the issue during events like this and I think it was going on 12 hours of duty. Our task was to pray when any remains were found and brought to the morgue. I hoped that of course we could offer a spiritual presence to the staff in and around the morgue too and to those on the Pile. I think we did. After the end of the shift we were brought back to the hotel, we always worked in teams of two, we were left off and told to go get some sleep before our next shift. I was incredibly tired, soul and body, I got in the elevator and went to my floor. As I exited the elevator I got disoriented and headed right instead of left. I was carrying or wearing my full gear, boots, bunker pants, helmet, chaplain coat. I heard voices. It was some staff members they were talking. I heard one say to the other who was crying, "did you hear yet from your brother? how is your mother doing? is she still listening to the phone message he left, trying to figure out where he was? Do you need to take some time off, if so I will cover for you?" As I walked to the room I heard and saw these three employees of the hotel. They were talking to one a housekeeper who was in tears as she was cleaning a room that a rescue worker was staying in. I apologized for interrupting and confessed that I was turned around while trying to find my room. The man who was obviously the supervisor looked at me, looked at my gear, looked at my tired and dirty face and hands, took my stuff out of my hands, took my room key and gently brought me the right way opened the door, hugged me and said to me. "praise be to you and all of you for coming here to help us, this city needs the presence of God, the divine and we appreciate you." I wept then and I weep now when I remember his words, his care of me and I today I wonder how the woman and her mother are doing who were waiting to hear word of her brother's fate.

The act of terror on 9-11 left us vulnerable and hurting. But it also has and had the potential to teach us to care for one another in all ways. That is my hope.

The profoundly insightful author Sebastian Unger wrote a book called "War" and another "Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging" his book speaks of the need for belonging, and at the same time it cautions us to not become so rooted in our own tribe that we keep "the other out".

One of the tests of 9-11 has been to balance a need for vigilance and safety with the ability to not see danger in every person who thinks, acts, looks or sees the world different than I do. The world is vaster than I can imagine, wider than my personal perspective and more awesome than my vision. I believe in a source of love that is grander than my mind, and that fills my heart and spirit with compassion and strength.

It is my hope that my reflections sustain you, challenge you, support you or give you reasons to disagree with me- that is what a Unitarian Universalist community is.

Welcome to this place, this day, this time.

May it be so.