

Sermon: "What Can We Do?"
Rev. John C. Duff

We have seen evil this week. Before our eyes, again and again, scenes unlike anything we had ever seen before in real life, though the special effects people in Hollywood had been simulating such things for us on movie screens for years.

"It was just like the movies," people said.

A strange commentary, this, on the movies, and on us who watch them. We entertain ourselves with images of unspeakable violence, and when unspeakable violence becomes reality on the skyline of New York, our unbelief that this is really happening is first expressed by saying, "It was just like the movies."

But it wasn't the movies. It was for real. Real lives were lost as millions watched it on television across the world. Thousands of people with names died. People whose pictures are carried about now by the dazed and grieving spouses, children, brothers and sisters of the victims wandering the streets of New York.

Nineteen people, we are told, took command of four airplanes and killed thousands of people, besides showing that the very nerve-centres of immensely powerful military and economic systems that reach around the world could be turned into rubble in a moment of time.

How could any human being contemplate taking so many lives at once? What kind of hatred could make it possible for any human being to actually carry out such violence?

Yet the footprint of the devastation in New York is only a few hundred yards wide. That much destruction has sent its ripples around the world, as we have seen this week in Newfoundland, as thousands of people unable to proceed to destinations in the United States landed in their jumbo jets at Gander, Goose Bay, Stephenville, Deer Lake, and St. John's.

After the first numbing shock of what we saw last week on television screens, the impulse that came to many was precisely this:

"What can we do?"

A priest in New York City, chaplain to the firefighters, knew what he could do. He went to where firefighters were struggling to control a blaze, help people escape, dig through the rubble. He went to where they were dying from the violence. He prayed with them, gave them signs of God's healing power in the very midst of the rubble, the dying, the smoke, the dust. As he prayed, another tower fell. And the priest died. The

firefighters pulled his body free, covered it in a sheet, brought it to the altar of his church.

Doctors and nurses in New York had something they could do. The injured came into their hospitals; as health care workers they worked to heal them, or to bring relief to their suffering as they died from their injuries.

For many across the world, there was little that they could do with their hands, and the event left them feeling powerless. On Friday, there was something to do, something symbolic, like standing in silence on Parliament Hill, lighting a candle in one of thousands of churches, listening to the solemn tolling of great bells, stopping in workplaces, schools, and homes to remember, to pray, and to grieve.

For some of us in Newfoundland, as it turned out, there was something practical that we could do. And what was done, the welcoming of thousands of stranded air travellers into church and community halls, arenas and homes, involved the efforts of thousands of people who clearly felt the need to do something besides being mesmerized by images of horror repeated again and again on television screens. Here at St. David's it started with a few people hearing that the churches might be needed as shelters; they spoke to neighbours and other people of the church and in two or three hours we had the church hall floor full of beds made up for dozens of guests. Others saw or heard what people here were doing, food arrived, people came and took towels away and washed them, some drove passengers to shopping centres to pick up changes of clothes and other essentials, and others took our guests out to see our famous landmarks, like Signal Hill and Cape Spear. Toys and games came, and children from here came to play with children who found themselves with their families in a strange place. Some people stayed for a few minutes at a time and some for more than twenty- four hours at a stretch. Needs were expressed, and people arrived who could address the needs. There was organization, but there was also the work of angels, I believe, making it all come together.

It was an astonishing time, and all the stories have not yet been told. It was powered, I believe, by the common need that gripped the world after the events of Tuesday, the common need to respond to the evil, to do something.

We could stay watching the images again and again on our televisions, in a way allow ourselves to be captivated by the violence and the evil, or we could do something.

And across the world, people have chosen to do something to express our solidarity as human beings with people of whatever race, or faith, language, or nationality, something to bring comfort, safety, shelter, caring, love, and peace to fellow human beings whose lives have been broken by terrible events. The instincts of millions of people lie in this direction.

Before our eyes in these days, we have seen flesh being put on a text which has

seemed difficult to accept just as bare words on a page. Paul wrote to the Romans,

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21).

We have seen that the living God can use ordinary people, people like you and me, as part of that tremendous surge of good that brings healing in the midst of injury, and peace in the midst of conflict and violence.

In the words we read from Paul’s letter to Timothy today, Paul expresses astonishment that someone like him, someone once “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence” could have been privileged to become the servant of the living God:

“I am grateful to Christ Jesus, our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he has judged me faithful and appointed me to his service.”

Paul believes that this could only have become possible for someone like him because

“the grace of our Lord overflowed for me,
with the faith and the love
that are in Christ Jesus.”

If people of St. David’s, people of Newfoundland, people across the world, have been empowered this week to do an astonishing amount of good, it is also because

“the grace of our Lord overflowed”

and many people have discovered the deep satisfaction and the privilege of being enabled to do something to make a difference. Whether they know its name or not, many people have experienced the power of the living God working through their actions, something that in its sum must and shall overcome the evil which has put a chill in our hearts in recent days.

From around the world, the evil has been denounced this week. From Christians in Palestine, and Christians in Cuba, have come expressions of shock and sorrow for the violence that has befallen the people of the United States, and also their prayers for justice and peace. From leaders of Islam have come condemnation for anyone who would take an innocent life for whatever cause, and the reminder that the very word Islam means “peace”. Some of the good that lies before us to do in days ahead is in the building of bridges among Christians in nations whose governments disagree with one another, and between Christians and people of other faiths who also espouse deep moral principles and seek to live with their neighbours in mutual respect, dignity, and peace. Just as we recognize that those in our own tradition who preach hatred or let themselves become mouthpieces for revenge do not speak truly on behalf of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ--so also we need to recognize that twisted minorities from within other faith traditions who profane the language of faith to justify hatred and the escalation of violence are also perverting and blaspheming their faith’s

deepest tenets.

On the cross, Jesus began to break the cycle of violence by absorbing it, by bearing hatred and anger directed towards him, by listening to the jeers of people at the foot of the cross and opening his mouth only to say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Even in the midst of doing good, it is necessary for followers of Jesus to take up the cross, to absorb anger unfairly directed.

Some volunteers in Newfoundland, some even within St. David's Church, experienced that this week. The great majority of passengers, who came here under bewildering circumstances, responded with great patience to conditions which, though they were the best we could do, were not like anything they may have had to put up with before. In fact they repeatedly thanked the many people who offered what they could. They were thankful enough that their plane had only been diverted onto an airfield in Newfoundland, and that they were alive, and that their plane was not one of those whose twisted course killed everyone on board, and many more besides. But among our guests, very understandably, were some not able to muster the grace that most did; and when some learned they were to return to Europe instead of continue to their destinations, there was some anger and rebellion. Some chose to stay in Newfoundland instead, and seek other means to reach their destinations in the U.S.A. There was some absorbing that had to be done, even here in Newfoundland, last week. And some of those who tried to help came home not only weary, but also wounded. But as we come together with our weariness and with our wounds, we find ourselves refreshed and healed by one another, and by the gracious Spirit of the Living God at work in our midst.

What has been astonishing this week has been the strength that many have shown, the strength of patience, of trust, of a willing spirit, of determination to do something, to do something decent and human and good, in response to the indecent, inhuman, and evil acts of Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001.

Some of the good that lies before us to do is to spread the experience we have had this week with our neighbours and with people from all over the world, so that the costly yet effective way of overcoming evil with good might take the place of darker instincts in people everywhere.

Let us pray for that. Let us pray for the "grace of our Lord" to "overflow" in these days. Let us pray that evil-doers may be brought to justice without the shedding of more innocent blood, and that the hurting and anger in a million hearts may be healed by the astonishing power of God's love at work in the hands and the hearts of millions more.

This week the fragility of life, and its preciousness, too, has come home, perhaps as never before in the lives of many of us. Apart altogether from the extraordinary

things people have been called on to do in response to disaster this week, surely our new awareness of the fragility and preciousness of life also invites us to live our everyday lives differently with those who are closest to us. Ken Templeton passed along these anonymous words, that came over the Internet this week in response to what has happened:

If I knew it would be the last time
That I'd see you fall asleep,
I would tuck you in more tightly
and pray the Lord, your soul to keep.

If I knew it would be the last time
that I see you walk out the door,
I would give you a hug and kiss
and call you back for one more.

If I knew it would be the last time
I'd hear your voice lifted up in praise,
I would video tape each action and word,
so I could play them back day after day.

If I knew it would be the last time,
I could spare an extra minute
to stop and say "I love you,"
instead of assuming you would KNOW I do.

If I knew it would be the last time
I would be there to share your day,
well I'm sure you'll have so many more,
so I can let just this one slip away.

For surely there's always tomorrow
to make up for an oversight,
and we always get a second chance
to make everything right.
There will always be another day
to say "I love you,"
And certainly there's another chance
to say our "Anything I can do?"

But just in case I might be wrong,
and today is all I get,
I'd like to say how much I love you
and I hope we never forget.

Tomorrow is not promised to anyone,

young or old alike,
And today may be the last chance you get
to hold your loved one tight.

So if you're waiting for tomorrow,
why not do it today?
For if tomorrow never comes,
you'll surely regret the day,
That you didn't take that extra time
for a smile, a hug, or a kiss
and you were too busy to grant someone,
what turned out to be their one last wish.

So hold your loved ones close today,
and whisper in their ear,
Tell them how much you love them
and that you'll always hold them dear.
Take time to say "I'm sorry,"
"Please forgive me," "Thank you," or "It's okay."

And if tomorrow never comes,
you'll have no regrets about today.
[Author Unknown]

What shall we do, in the face of the evil that has broken in on us last week?

We don't know the whole answer to that question, today.

But there are some places we can start. And with the grace of the Lord
overflowing within us, we shall.

AMEN.