

Choose Peace
[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer
Lynnewood United Methodist Church
September 11, 2016

Today we remember September 11, 2001. I know every year I will remember 9-11, but when the date falls on a Sunday, as it did five years ago on the 10th anniversary, and as it does today on the 15th anniversary, the day becomes truly a sacred day of remembrance.

On one of the days that followed 9-11, someone wrote words in chalk on the base of the statue of George Washington in Union Square Park, by Ground Zero in lower Manhattan: "LOVE ONE ANOTHER," and in upper case letters the word "LOVE" many times.

Churches in New York opened their doors to full houses for worship that next Sunday. People needed to be together and to be in prayer. On weekdays, as usual churches fed the homeless, and they also fed the fire fighters, who were covered in white-gray ash. In those first days, as the city came to grips with the tragedy, one woman remembers staring into the eyes of strangers across a makeshift lunch table, everyone with tears. People made new connections with strangers in the aftermath of 9-11 and clung to their loved ones.

Churches offered prayer and food and counseling. They emptied their thrift stores of clothes and gave away everything. There was a spirit of generous love.

One United Methodist Church, fearing a backlash of hatred after 9-11, looked to the Social Principles of our Church and found that in our written statements we are a church opposed to the use of violence to solve international problems. And so these folks made postcards urging peace and distributed them widely.

The United Methodist Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew in New York City held an interfaith dinner. And they continue every year to bring together 50 Christians, 50 Muslims, and 50 Jewish people for what they call a "peace feast."

My family attended a dinner shortly after 9-11 at Asbury United Methodist Church in Livermore, where Muslims and Christians sat and ate together and prayed for peace. We heard how Muslims in Livermore were afraid to go out after 9-11 and how much they appreciated a time to speak and be heard as peace-loving people.

Our faith is a resource to us at such times. September 11 brought people of all faiths together. Peace prayer services and requiem concerts were held all around the country in the fall of 2001.

Churches continue to give comfort to the families of the nearly 3,000 people who died on September 11. These immediate deaths included 265 people who were on the four planes, 2,606 people at the World Trade Center, and 125 at the Pentagon. We mourn the loss of these lives today.

And we want to do more than mourn. We want to find a path that leads to peace.

Our scripture sets before us the challenge. God says, "See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... I have set before you...blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days" (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

This challenge is really the same challenge we heard Jesus give to the people, when he talked about the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). It is the same challenge that all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible give. Here we have the Prophet Moses, speaking for God and saying, "Choose life!"

Now, you can say, we didn't *choose* death and destruction on September 11th. And, of course, we didn't. We were completely shocked by what happened. Disbelief was the first response. And now, sadly, 15 years later, terrorist attacks shock us less. On September 11, we experienced a loss of innocence. We have poured 700 billion dollars into Homeland Security since 9-11, but are we safe yet? I don't think so (<https://www.nationalpriorities.org/cost-of/homeland-security-since-911/>).

As much as violence continues to threaten us, we still have a choice how to live our lives. Even in Bible times, there certainly was tremendous violence, and yet God always says, "Choose life." We have the choice, and, even in times of disaster, we can still reclaim grace and love. Instead of acting in anger and revenge, we can choose to love because love is always stronger than hate. We do not have control over international events, but we can, at least, look at our own lives and find a path that leads to peace. We can choose peace.

The labyrinth is a symbol of a path that leads to wholeness. There is only one way into the center. The labyrinth is not a maze, to get lost in. You cannot get lost in a labyrinth. You simply walk one step at a time on the only path there is. It leads to the center. We can say, it leads to God.

There is so much we cannot control. We cannot control world events. We cannot even control our own circumstances much of the time. But we can choose to walk on the path that leads to God.

There are so many ways to do this. Literally, you can walk a labyrinth today between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. in the Fellowship Hall, or at any number of permanent labyrinths in the Bay Area.

Or you can figuratively walk the path to God by your choices of how you spend your time. You may choose to take a Bible study class—one starts tonight at 7:00 in the church library. Or you can choose to put prayer into your daily life, by praying at meals with your family, or when you get up, or when you go to bed.

You can participate in a service project every month with folks from this church. You can make service be your path to God. Or perhaps you will join the choir and make music be your path. Or maybe this will be the time when you decide to tithe a tenth of your income to the church, and choose to live on 90% of what you make. That would be an intentional path of making stewardship a priority in your life.

The disciplined life is the life with conscious choices. When you choose to participate in God's work, you are then choosing not to do other things. It's like choosing to have a family meal together, which means perhaps not watching television or spending as much time surfing the Net or posting on social media. Now, there is nothing wrong with these pastimes, but if you want to strengthen your family and your faith, then sitting down together at a meal may be a good choice for you to make. We choose what is best for us according to our values.

And always, the Christian values promote abundant life, life with meaning and life with service.

Evan Hunsberger was 13 when he found a worn copy of a little book that his grandfather had carried as a Navy Corpsman during World War II. It was a pocket-sized devotional, like this, except that the one his grandfather had with him through the war was old and discolored from a lot of use: *Strength for Service to God and Country*. His grandfather always had it by his bed, and so, Evan was interested in the little book that must have meant a lot to him. Evan learned that one million other servicemen had carried this little book with them during World War II. The Methodist publishing company had printed the original edition in 1942, and in the 1950s the book went out of print. In 2002, for his Eagle Scout project, Evan decided to republish the pocket-sized devotional. He set himself a goal to print and distribute 5000 copies for the Marines at Camp Pendleton. He thought the book would be helpful to anyone who was in service of others. So he updated the language slightly, added a few more contemporary devotional pages and also a short section for Jewish and Muslim readers at the end. The United Methodist publishing company, Abingdon Press, printed the new edition.

In the years following the attacks on 9-11, the Pentagon asked for 1 million copies of *Strength for Service to God and Country*, and later they requested 2 more million. The United Methodist Men, the men's group of our denomination, has been actively raising awareness and money to supply a copy to every man or woman serving in the U.S. armed forces because the U.S. military cannot use government funds to pay for a religious book. A companion volume now out, *Strength for Service to God and Community*, is a resource for first responders, or any person doing volunteer work.

Evan Hunsberger is now married with two children. He continues to work to put this little book into the hands of those needing comfort as they serve their country and their world (<http://www.strengthforservice.org/test-news-item/>, *Veterans Magazine* May 2007 Nashville, Tenn., <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3320847/The-WWII-devotional-long-forgotten-s-bestseller-thanks-Eagle-Scout.html>).

The book gives a devotional for every day of the year. I'd like to read the entry for September 11 from the newest edition.

Risen from the Ashes

There are many stories that have emerged from the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Stories of bravery, self-sacrifice, and service, above and beyond the call of duty, have risen from the ashes in New York City. As has been the custom of our nation throughout its history, we allowed triumph to come out of tragedy.

One of the many who lost their lives that September day was a Franciscan Friar named Mychal F. Judge. He was 68 when he was killed by debris from the collapse of the towers. When first responders pulled the Friar's body from the rubble, they found a small card in his pocket with words that have become known as Mychal's Prayer:

*Lord, take me where You want me to go
Let me meet who You want me to meet
Tell me what You want me to say and
Keep me out of Your way*

What better prayer could any of us pray on a daily basis? We need a prayer that both confesses submission and professes service to our Creator.

Your life is marked by a call of duty to your fellow human beings. Today, as you live and serve, think on Jesus' words ["He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30)]...allowing [God] to become greater, while also whispering this prayer that was pulled from the rubble of 9-11 (Strength for Service to God and Community, 2012, p. 254).

Once in a while someone asks me, "What does your church believe?" Today I would answer, "We believe in the power of love."

The pastor of John Street United Methodist Church, whose building is located three blocks from the World Trade Center, encourages his congregation to share the power of love they learned from 9-11. He says:

"I think [we] are more empathetic having experienced the chaos of that day. We remember what it was like to be running scared, not knowing where our loved ones were, and what was going to happen next. Living through that moment, you realize how many people around the world face terrible adversity every day. I think the Holy Spirit can use that awareness to increase our ability to love one another" (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/responding-to-hate-9-11-and-the-power-of-love>).

Through tragedy, people of faith recognize the need for love. No matter what, we must dare to love. "Choose life," the ancient biblical text says. Choose love. Choose peace.