

**The Anger and Forgiveness of God
Christians in a Post-9-11 World
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Last week, I took my son, Tate, to Boston University, where he enrolled as a freshman. Seemed like everyone told me how painful this separation was going to be – that I would, frankly, cry the whole plane ride home.

I didn't – but the trip was hard. As I said good-bye and hugged him Saturday night, I rubbed my hand across his crew-cut head – like rubbing the Buddha's belly for good luck - I've done that since he was a child and knew this might be the last time I would rub it until Christmas. Tears swelled my eyes, and empathetic Tate sensing my angst, wanted to console me – the son protecting the father.

But Tate did not share my sadness. This was my grief, not his; For Tate, this was his future, his moment of hope. He was anxious, but only about whether he would make new friends and pass exams.

Since my children were born, literally since the moment of their birth, I have harbored only a few, very simple hopes for them – nothing complicated: I want them to come into their own, to learn to be truly who they are, and not what others expect, not needing to best others, or climb ladders that lead to nowhere.

In her book, *Animal Dreams*, Barbara Kingsolver expressed my parental hope this way:

Elemental kindness, and ... The possibility that [our] kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it.

Neither the destroyers nor the destroyed ...

I envision her words like the side boundaries of a football field; on one side is the boundary of destroying others – out of bounds, and on the other side is the boundary of being destroyed – out of bounds. And you want your child to stay in the big middle, to play life in the middle of the field.

But living in the middle is not enough. To play within boundaries, to be simply neither the destroyer nor the destroyed, is not enough.

As Christians, God and good and the universe call us to greater – something you have heard week after week, year after year, here in this place, and in Christian circles. And that is this:

To push at these boundaries, in our professional lives and in our personal lives - to broaden the playing field to accommodate more people in the middle, to reduce the number of those who would destroy and be destroyed.

To save the destroyer and heal the destroyed.

To do this, the Christian stands against evil in every form, and offers healing in every form.

Forgiveness. Peter asked, must I forgive seven times? He wasn't trying to be stingy, but generous. Seven times, but even seven times is insufficient, says Jesus - seventy times seven.

Seventy times seven, and you see, forgiveness is no longer a number.

There is no cap on forgiveness, no tally sheet, no ledger listing debits and credits.

You can't say, I will forgive you only one more time – but beyond that ...

This is because forgiveness is not something you do. It is the posture you assume, the essence of your core.

Some people say, "To forgive, you have to choose it." An act of will, a turning from unforgiveness to forgiveness – Maybe, but that has never worked for me. Forgiveness for me has only come as I became a lover.

When I have stood naked and open before God, acknowledging my own failings, and accepting the completely undeserved grace of God –

For it is only when you realize that what you have – all that you have – is completely undeserved and completely unearned – can you forgive another from the heart.

This is the ultimate stewardship sermon – because forgiveness is the ultimate act of generosity – you become generous because God was generous to you.

I am not suggesting forgiveness is easy. Pushing at the boundaries of the field to reduce the hurt is not easy.

How did 9-11 change us? That is the most-asked question of the week. Did it soften us or harden us? Did we as a people embrace the opportunity of the times, or did we squander it?

At first, we became kind to one another, softer, more vulnerable at a deep level, and embraced by all the countries of the world.

For the first time in a generation, we realized how fragile life can be, that violence on a massive scale can scale our borders.

This vulnerability spawned not so much faith, but fear. Somewhere, the natural fear that something awful would happen again lurked at the corners, and we, the victim, lashed out to protect ourselves.

A victim does have the right to protect himself, to avoid destruction – but unchecked fear actually becomes the destroyer, destroying from within ... We have done everything we can to protect ourselves, but we aren't completely safe – nobody ever is.

Complete safety is an illusion, secure borders are imaginary. The world has always been dangerous, precarious, willful and precocious. Bears and lions in forests and jungles, snakes and adders, and sharks and barracuda. In the words of Martin Luther,

this world with devils filled ...
threaten[s] to undo us.

The prince of darkness [is] grim...

The question is, what do you do with the fear? Martin Luther continues:

[though] the prince of darkness [be] grim,
we tremble not for him,
his rage we can endure,
for lo his doom is sure.

We must trust – in Providence, and in our own goodness, which brings me back to forgiveness:

Do we have to forgive those who tried to kill us? Who still want to kill us? Yes,
we do.

First, let's not confuse forgiveness with passivity. Forgiveness doesn't mean we as a country don't act to protect ourselves. When a spouse is being abused, she must leave home and obtain a restraining order against her husband.

Along those lines, there is nothing wrong with strengthening airport screening and creating Homeland Security.

Second, sometimes, an evil aggressor must be pursued – a criminal, and perhaps a foreign aggressor. So I am not commenting on whether we should have landed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Those are public policy decisions ... however, I am saying that acting purely out of fear or victimhood is a bad motivation. Which leads to my third point:

Fear as motivator – We cannot let fear motivate us. We cannot let fear dominate us. In the words of President Roosevelt, the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.

Instead, we must let love motivate us. Including forgiveness – and diffuses fear – or, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "perfect love casts out fear."

How do you forgive people so closely aligned with evil? Osama bin Laden, al Qaida, the hijackers?

There is only one way that I know of – and that is to realize that your ability and willingness to forgive is not about them, it is about you.

It is about your spiritual health, your grace, your willingness to live within the boundaries of the field, and even your willingness to expand the boundaries of the field.

Story of Eva Kor – the holocaust survivor, who with her sister, became part of Mengela's experiments on twins. They were horribly abused. Years later, after raising a family in the United States, Eva returned to Auschwitz and publicly read her own statement of forgiveness, that, if you can imagine, she called, an official declaration of amnesty to Mengele and the Nazis.

Amnesty, without their apology, without Mengele's admission of wrongdoing, she forgave them, and in the process, was healed: again, her words, she experienced the complete freedom from pain.

God wants to heal us – not just the families of those who died ten years ago, but all of us. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting, it doesn't mean we don't protect ourselves, but it does mean turning to love over hate, light over darkness, hope over despair.

It means mobilizing the generosity and kindness and unity that was ours by gift following 9-11, and thus it means forgiveness – forgiveness of those who don't want it, don't know they need it – Forgiveness, for our sake as much as for theirs.