



UNITED BY HOPE

September 11, 2011, The 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9: 30-40

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Theme: On this day, we must not only remember but also strive to be “united by hope.”

Gracious God, may your Spirit lift the ancient words of Scripture we just heard off the page, bear them across ages and then set them in our minds and on our hearts this morning. May they speak into our time and shape the choices we make as individuals, as the church, as a nation, as citizens of the world. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I have been wearing this black rubber wristband since last spring. I don't plan to until after this service. It was given to me by two members of our congregation, a wonderful young couple at whose wedding I officiated. Both work at the 9/11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan. They gave it to me as they passed through the greeting line after church last spring. I very much like what it says. In fact, I decided a while ago that the three words on my wristband were just the right words to shape this service today. It reads: “9/11 Memorial – United by Hope.” “Memorial, United, Hope” – three perfect words for this day ten years later.

“Memorial...” Memorials remember, of course. Today we remember 2,983 lives cut short. We remember the grief of widows and widowers, of children who lost parents and parents who lost children, the grief of so many friends and lovers. We also remember acts of extraordinary courage, especially those of the nearly 400 first responders who died that day.

The water falling inward in the Memorial's two pools cannot but call to mind buildings collapsing and all the tears we have shed. Later in this service, we'll set those tears and our remembering in the context of the prayers for the day. We'll



toll the steeple bell sorrowfully and then at the end of the prayer, we will “ring changes,” that patterned ringing that accompanies more hopeful announcements.

At funerals and memorial services, I often challenge mourners to “remember forward.” To remember forward is to recall life lost in a way that moves beyond sentiment and nostalgia for the past. It’s an invitation to remember in a way that shapes the future, to remember by self-consciously working to be guided, shaped, and strengthened by the best that was, the noblest and most selfless of the life you are remembering.

So also today – we remember not only the pall of sorrow cast over the nation a decade ago. But we “remember forward” so that the brightest lights of those lost, the glowing courage of so many that day, might illumine our way forward. And we remember not only that very day, but also the days that followed. We remember the incredible sense of national, even global, unity which emerged following the attacks. It was fleeting, but it *was* palpable, and because it *was*, it *can yet be*. My point is that just remembering is not quite enough for this day. We are called to remember forward.

The other two words on my wristband do just that. They point forward, daring to imagine that we could be “united by hope.” Human beings are united by a great many things, many of them perverse. People are united by race and language, sect and geography; too often they are united by hatred and anger. My wristband has the cheek to imagine that human being could actually be *united by hope*. Such a thing would be extraordinary.

One of our Brick members who gave me my wristband said that the 9/11 Memorial, the two fountains, the trees and the museum, will all strive to remember what she named “our collective capacity to come together.” The hard truth is that any such “coming together” in this world is *exactly* what that terrorist act ten years ago most feared. Anything even vaguely like human unity or solidarity that has the audacity to cross lines of religion or culture is precisely what that abominable attack wanted to destroy. That act was self-consciously intended to divide humanity; it was intended to alienate, it meant to draw the sharpest of lines, to separate people, to create an “us” and “them.”



Oddly enough, drawing a line between “us” and “them” is just what at least one of Jesus’ followers wanted to do in the story that Debbie read to us a moment ago from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is traveling with his disciples, teaching them and healing the sick, when one of them, John, comes to him and says that when he and some of the other disciples were wandering about, they saw a guy – a guy who was *not* a member of Jesus’ circle – praying for people to be healed (the language of the time says he was “casting out demons.”). John says that this guy even had the gall to invoke Jesus’ name as he did this. John then proudly announces that they’d ordered this “not-one of us” guy to stop it, ordered him to stop simply because (to quote John) “he was not following us.”

Now, the extraordinary climax of this story is Jesus’ response to John’s line-drawing. “*Do not stop him...*” Jesus says, and then he speaks these surprising and crucially important words, “*Whoever is not against us is for us.*”

All of us draw “us and them” circles, of course. We draw “us and them” religious circles. The problem, ironically, is not that we do this. The problem is that we don’t draw enough circles. In this story, Jesus is saying that there is one last, rather large, circle that we must draw.

Here’s what I mean. In our time and place, we draw a circle called “The Brick Church.” There are members and non-members. Non-members are welcome to most everything, but members have concretely committed themselves to the faith and to the congregation. They can vote and provide leadership. This is an important religious circle to draw. We also draw a larger religious circle called “Presbyterian.” I love Methodists and Episcopalians, but they aren’t Presbyterians and don’t want to be. This also is an appropriate religious circle. We draw a bigger circle called “Protestant.” We deeply respect Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, but again, they’re not Protestants and have no desire to be so. We draw a circle called “Christian” that, by definition, does not encompass Jews and Muslims – or atheists, for that matter. They’d not want to be included. It’s an obviously important religious circle to draw.



You'd think you'd stop your circle-drawing here, but Jesus' unexpected answer to John implies that there's one more, much larger, circle to be drawn. When he says, "Whoever is not against us is for us," Jesus actually draws a circle, a circle that includes "those who are not following us," but are not "against us." This circle includes all who will the good and would do the right, but are not followers of Jesus, specifically in the context of that day, his circle encompasses this unnamed guy who wanted to heal, but was not one of his followers.

In our time, I think this means we need to draw a great big circle that pulls in not "followers," not just Christians, but all who would stand for the great values we would hold close and guard – namely an open, tolerant society imbued with democratic values. This circle would include atheists, and agnostics, Buddhists and Hindus, Jews... *and, also, Muslims* who hold these values.

This "whoever is not against us is for us" circle I am imagining would include, for instance, the Muslim scholar Irshad Manji. Manji, a Canadian who now lives here in New York, has written two books. Her first was called *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call to Reform in Her Faith*. Her more recent book is entitled *Allah, Liberty, and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom*. In both books, she calls for a tolerant, non-violent Islam that affirms women as equals and engages modernity in open, democratic, free societies. Manji, to quote Jesus, "is not against us," which, Jesus says, makes her "for us" – inside the big circle.

Please note this however: there are those who are outside this "not against us" circle. We have enemies. Irshad Manji knows this only too well. She has received death threats and has often done book tours with a bodyguard.

In a refreshingly frank piece he wrote for last Saturday's *New York Times*, the critic Edward Rothstein lamented the naively romantic "fuzzy-feeling" sentimentality of some of the many 9/11 memorial tributes in the media, museums and, one fears, churches. Speaking of terrorists in general, Rothstein writes "They all involved a disgust with modernity in the West and tried... to destroy its culture and institutions. Democratic culture," he continues, "might seem innocuous to us, but it assaults fundamentalisms with its variety, unpredictability, contradiction, dissipation, and possibility. And then he reminds us of what Muslim Irshad Manji



would also say, namely that “Islamic fundamentalism is one of the most powerful and dangerous manifestations of such passions.”

There has been no small controversy occasioned by the fact that today’s ceremony down at the World Trade Center site is being conducted without benefit of clergy. There’ll be NYPD and Fire Department Chaplains of course, but not on the stage. There’ll be no prayers, at least none spoken aloud. Most of the criticism of this decision comes from people suspicious of a rising tide of secularism in our nation, lamenting that we are a society increasingly irreligious and loathe to permit public manifestation of any faith.

That may well be, but I suspect another reason why there’s no clergy on the podium. New York is an incredibly religiously diverse city, so you couldn’t just have the archbishop, you’d have to have a Protestant minister or two, and of course a rabbi or three.... and then you’d have to have an imam, a Muslim clergyman. I suspect, for many, any Muslim on that stage would have been offensive. But I know Muslims – clergy and lay – who hate terrorism and love freedom as much as I do. It could have been one of them. But fact is that a lot of people are not ready to draw a great big “those who are not against us are for us” circle yet, the circle Jesus drew. I do know this: if hope might ever even vaguely unite us, that’s exactly the big circle we must draw.

In the sermon he preached from this pulpit ten years ago, the Sunday after 9/11, Brick’s Interim Minister Bill Phillippe quoted the 91st Psalm, the very same verses I selected for today’s Call to Worship. In that sermon, Bill also quoted Thomas Hobbes, of all people. I say, “of all people,” because Hobbes, that seminal 17th Century English political philosopher, was hardly an exemplar of Christian piety. The Hobbes quote that Bill Phillippe included in his sermon goes like this. *“The passion whose violence maketh madness is either great vainglory, which is commonly called pride and self-conceit, or great defection of the mind. Pride subjecteth a man to anger, the excess whereof is the madness called rage, and fury.”*



If we are ever to draw a circle that includes people with whom we profoundly disagree on some matters, it requires nothing less than the subjugation of that kind of human pride, that vainglory, that self-conceit.

In the first part of the Bible passage from Mark that Debbie read earlier today, before John's report about the stranger casting out demons, Jesus' disciples were having an argument about "who was the greatest. Jesus overheard them and said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." To draw the big circle, you need just that kind of humility.

A rabbi once made the same point when he quipped to me, "There are only two words in the English language that are distinguished in their spelling by where you place the letter 'i.'" Those two words are "untied" and "united."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.