

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

“A Time to Heal”

September 11, 2001

9-11 Anniversary Service

When I was a little boy, my church had an annual Father and Son Banquet. My father had three sons, so every year he loaned me to a man named Harve Hemmer, who had no sons. Well, had had a son, an only child. His son was a fighter pilot in WWII and was shot down over France. And every year at the Father and Son Banquet, Mr. Hemmer would put his arm around my shoulders, get tears in his eyes and dream of what might have been. The Second World War was the watershed event of that generation—a great victory, to be sure, but also a time of tragedy and loss. Mr. and Mrs. Hemmer—and all the thousands of Mr. and Mrs. Hemmers—had an ache in their heart and were just looking for ways to heal.

Sadly, every generation seems to have such a watershed event—WWI, WWII, Korea, Viet Nam . . . 9-11. All different from one another in length and numbers of casualties and details, but all the same in at least one respect—pain. Mixed in with our joy and accomplishments, every generation has an ache in the heart and is looking for ways to heal.

There is, claims Ecclesiastes, a time for every purpose under heaven—a time to be born and a time to die, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time for war and a time for peace. But living wisely, says one teacher, means knowing what time it is. Wisdom is knowing *what to do when*.¹

Well, today, I believe—this tenth anniversary of 9-11—it is for one thing a time to remember. We heal not by forgetting, nor by trying to pretend we have no pain. Remembering does not mean getting stuck in the past nor simply wallowing in grief or fear. But remembering is the debt of honor we pay to those who were wounded or lost their lives. We will not read each name here this morning, as they will in some places. But we do remember and don't forget, the 2,996 who died on 9-11 itself, including 411 emergency workers. We remember and do not forget the over 4600 US military members who have died in the wars since 9-11, and somehow we try to the mind-boggling 100,000 or more Afghans and Iraqis killed in those wars. We honor them by not forgetting. Today is a time to remember.

Today is further, I submit to you, a time for peace. Ecclesiastes insists that “there is a time for war and a time for peace.” Peace has had a

rough go of it since 9-11. Okay, let's face it, peace always has a rough go of it. Some people mistake the purpose of peace for weakness or even a lack of patriotism. Tony Campolo says that times of national crisis tend to make us forget—or perhaps simply not want to hear--what Jesus told us. Right after 9-11 Campolo spoke to a group about the need for forgiveness and nonviolence. After he had finished speaking, a man came up to him and said, "This is no time to go around quoting Jesus!"² But, of course, every day is the time to quote Jesus, even (I might say especially) if what Jesus says seems to go against the spirit of the times.

Now I don't mean that we should just lie down and let other kill more innocent people. And I'm not so naïve as to believe that just because we stop fighting, there'll be some magic, perfect peace. But we can try. As the apostle Paul says in Romans 12: "*so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*" We've had a time for war, ten years for war. Let's make up our minds, let's communicate to our leaders, let's tell everyone that in the name of Jesus Christ, it's time for peace.

But today is above all a time to heal. For ten years we've carried this wound in our spirit. For ten years images of the Twin Towers collapsing

have haunted our hearts. For ten years, whether we like to admit it or not, rage and retribution have lurked in the backs of our minds. But there is, claims Ecclesiastes, a time for every purpose under heaven. There is, it is true, a time to weep and mourn, a time to break down, even a time (perhaps) to kill. But there must also be a time to laugh and to dance, a time to build up again. And if there is a time to kill, there surely also is a time to heal.

If in fact there is a time for everything, then come what may there is no need to be alarmed or to despair, because everything is within God's will, everything is in God's hands.³ Therefore, the psalm says, we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.

For ten years we have been a country, like old Mr. Hemmer, looking for a way to heal. Well, my friends, put your arms around one another's shoulders. Cry the tears you need to cry. And dream of what by the grace of God American yet can be. As we light these candles today, may the fire warm and cleanse your heart. May they shine for you the light of hope. As the choir sings, *Kyrie, eleison*—Lord, have mercy—may you find that mercy for yourself and for our country. Wisdom is knowing what time it is. And today is a time to heal. May it be so. Amen.

¹ E. Carson Brisson, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-8," *Between Text & Sermon*, *Interpretation* (55/3, July 2001), 294.

² Tony Campolo, "The Best of Times, the Worst of Times," in *The Sunday After Tuesday: College Pulpits Respond to 9/11*, ed. William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 52.

³ See Elsa Tamez, "Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery," *Interpretation* (55/3, July 2001), 257.