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“Can anyone of sound mind believe that the reward for Jihad could be some virgins in Paradise? Is it conceivable that anyone who listens to music will be swallowed by the earth?”

Today is, of course, the fifteenth anniversary of the indescribable horror of that day when four commercial passenger-filled airliners were hijacked, a day when we witnessed the gut-wrenching sight of human beings jumping to their death from the towers of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City, the victims of what the author of the words I just quoted would call “ignorance of true Islam.” Nonetheless, the suicidal killers believed they were engaged in Jihad as they followed one Osama bin Laden, a militant self-proclaimed follower of Islam who believed the corruption of western society was an affront to God as he understood God’s will for us.

Almost immediately, some self-proclaimed Christian leaders essentially joined with bin Laden by saying that the attacks of 9/11 were God’s punishment for the hedonistic and materialistic and frequently anti-religious ways of the United States.

Ironically — and maybe “ironically” is not the right word, — they were picking up a theme that is found in our earlier reading from Jeremiah and that permeates the Old Testament’s understanding of the history of the Jewish people: when bad things happened, it was God’s punishment for the failure of the leaders and the Jewish people to follow God’s laws.

Interestingly though the Hebrew prophets did not see God as punishing non-believers, who certainly numbered more than a few of the almost 3000 killed that fatal day fifteen years ago, and so there is some disconnect between the idea that God may have punished believers, like you and me by killing what in percentages were just a few of us while killing some unbelievers as well.

But before I return to 9/11, there is some reason to understand how self-proclaimed purists like bin Laden would look down their noses at what they saw or see as the morally corrupt western civilization. . . and an abandonment of God for worship of the material world.

Most of you remember the late comedian Jack Benny, who was a mastery of timing and of the pregnant pause, I think best illustrated by the routine in which the penny-pinching Benny was held up by a robber who said, “Your money or your life!” Following a brief silence, the robber again said, “I said, your money or your life!” How many of you remember how this one ends? (“I’m thinking; I’m thinking!”)

An absurd response, of course, one might even say, “Stupid,” though this was obviously brilliant humor, but that story was suggested to me by part of our Gospel Lesson this morning, the second parable or metaphor in which, speaking to a group of “sinners and tax collectors,” Jesus uses the image of a woman with ten silver coins:

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'"

That parable follows the one that I like to use as the directive for my ministry, the "one lost sheep" out of one-hundred. The two parables tie together to amplify the same message, but why was it necessary for Jesus to use the image of the lost silver coin when he had used the "lost sheep" example?

Well at least one theory is explained if we note that *tax collectors* were among his audience; presumably, if a tax collector failed to understand the image of the lost sheep, at least knowing the value of money, the tax collector would understand the significance of losing a silver coin. Jesus sought to use imagery that people would understand, thus the parables that he used are really easy to understand, even if they can admit to offering more than one message — as do the two magnificent parables found only in Luke of "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son."

To the bin Laden's of the world, be they Muslim or Christian or neither, Americans understand only hedonism and monetary and material values, not higher values. So the question I want to ask is, "Are we as Christians who happen to be Americans, and I hope it is in that order, are we so *dense* that we cannot understand the message of the lost sheep, and can only understand the significance of value when expressed as money?" And does not that question relate to a society that worships not God but material well-being?

"Dense" is far more polite than the term Jeremiah ascribed to God, "My people are stupid." "Stupid" for not following God's commands.

And I suppose we might be more polite than using "stupid" to describe those who believe there are virgins awaiting them in Paradise when they kill infidels in the cause of "Jihad"; we might label them "misguided" and "ignorant," but are we as Christians susceptible to ignorance ourselves as a result of our reactions as Americans to the events of 9/11 and to a subsequent fifteen years of other horrible events properly characterized as *Islamist* — and please note that word, not *Islamic* but *Islamist* — *terrorism*. The distinction is important, by the way, for would any of us label as *Christian* the bombing of abortion clinics or the killing of an abortion-performing doctor?

But — and I'll use a name, Franklin Graham, — there are self-proclaimed and somewhat recognized "Christian leaders" who in *ignorance*, and *ignorance* means "not knowing," it does not mean "stupidity," there are self-proclaimed and somewhat recognized "Christian leaders" who in *ignorance* have blasted an entire religion and the hundreds of millions of people who share it, because of the abortion-clinic-bomber mentality that characterizes enough of them to terrify us all. 9/11 has given rise among a substantial number of Americans, both demagogue politicians and less informed innocents, including a substantial

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number of well-intentioned Christians, 9/11 has given rise to a hatred of Islam and fear of those who follow it.

And among them and among those of us who do not share that hatred and fear, it has given rise to “Where are the so-called moderates who will speak out against these radicals?”

How many of you know who is the author of the quotation with which I began my remarks: “Can anyone of sound mind believe that the reward for Jihad could be some virgins in Paradise? Is it conceivable that anyone who listens to music will be swallowed by the earth?” Did you read it in your newspaper or hear it on television or radio? Did any of those who share your political persuasion send it to you by e-mail?

This same person went on, “In this context, I call upon” — and I’ll leave “whom” open for a moment — “living abroad to adhere to the values of their religion . . . I call upon them to be always among the first to defend peace, harmony, and coexistence in their countries of residence. . . The terrorists who operate in the name of Islam are not Muslims. They have nothing to do with Islam. . .”

All this is from a radio address on August 20 by the king — King Mohammed VI — of Morocco; the “whom” is Moroccans living outside of Morocco, principally in France, and noting specifically the anti-Muslim character of the killing of that priest near Rouen.

As Americans, we are called upon to stamp out terrorism that threatens innocent lives, but as Christians, we are called not to be stupid, not to allow ourselves to wallow in ignorance, but to reflect on what God’s message to us is, which, beginning about the time Jeremiah died, was to recognize that the God we know in Jesus Christ wants us to be a beacon to all of humankind, so that even those who do not recognize Jesus Christ, might somehow see Christ and through Him, God, in us.

We Christians are not at war with Islam or even with Islamists as human beings, though we are united against the Islamist perversion. If we are capable of recognizing what Jesus was trying to say in the parable of the lost sheep without having to think in monetary terms, we can understand that God would have *all* God’s created children know salvation through him, and that can only come if we, you and I and Christ’s Church, are indeed a light to the nations, a light to peoples, *all* people, of the world, Muslim, Hindu, or of no faith at all. For all are like sheep, perhaps not “lost” sheep, but sheep that Jesus wants in his flock . . . and so also are we Christians who do not yet understand what losing even one sheep, to heck with a silver coin, means to the Good Shepherd.

Amen