

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 11, 2011
Matthew 7:24-27

"Build Your House on Rock"

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable
in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

At about 5 PM on December 1, 1987, my friend and colleague Andy Gustafson, who was then a practicing lawyer, returned to his home in Townsend, Massachusetts, to discover the body of his pregnant wife Priscilla on the bed in the master bedroom. Priscilla had died as a result of two gunshot wounds to the head-shots fired through a pillow covering her head. Andy called 911 immediately and the police arrived in minutes. The police then discovered the bodies of Andy's two children, William, five years old, and Abigail, eight years old. The children had been drowned-William in the upstairs bathroom, Abigail in the downstairs bathroom.

What happened to Andy is beyond anyone's worst nightmare. The horror of horrors had occurred. Andy's greatest loves-his wife and two children-were murdered. The people he loved the most in the world suffered violent, terrifying deaths.

Andy's grief was enormous, the life force drained out of him.

He was overwhelmed with sorrow.

That was 1987.

Today, Andy is a peaceful and happy person. You have met him. He works for the MACUCC as the Conference Minister for Stewardship and Financial Development. Andy came to our Church in March 2009 and was our guest preacher, here in this pulpit. You loved his sermon and were pleased to meet him. He loved our church and keeps talking about coming back to worship and maybe to preach again.

How did Andy survive such a crushing, overpowering horror in his life? How did he go on? How can Andy be such a centered, calm, peaceful, stable and happy person today?

Andy has answers to those questions...he is quite clear and remarkably articulate.

What helped Andy through this enormous trauma? He says the answer is twofold: God and community.

This week I asked Andy about the deaths and that horrific time in his life and he told me that he did not discover his faith when his family was killed, rather, he said, "...my faith had been formed over a long period of time thanks to many, many people-my wife and her family, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and fellow travelers on the faith journey." He went on to say, "The rock that sustained me did not appear suddenly out of nowhere, but really was that Body of Christ consisting of all who seek to follow in Jesus' way."

Andy told me that the Biblical passage that sustained him in the weeks, months and years following the trauma, the passage that he still turns to, quotes often and gives him strength and hope is Matthew 7:24-27...

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25The rain fell, the floods came,

and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-and great was its fall!

Andy built his house on rock...a sturdy faith that knew and understood God as a constant, always-near, always-loving presence. Andy built his house on a rock and when the very foundation of his life was shaken, and shaken profoundly, he was able to stand steady and even secure knowing God was near, feeling God would hold him close, believing that God wept when he wept, and experiencing God as a never-ending source of comfort.

Andy built his house on a rock...and so when everything crumbled around him he was still able to place his feet on unshakable ground, and go on.

It is my experience that when people are confronted with enormous tragedy-like Andy confronted, like 9/11-they react in one of two ways: either they blame God, and their faith is deeply shaken and sometimes never recovers; or they turn to God and are grateful for the comfort and solace they experience in God's presence.

I have seen this bifurcation over and over again. I believe that the dramatic fork-in-the-road that suddenly appears when tragedy strikes-the choice to turn away from God or turn toward God-reflects a person's deepest understanding of the divine.

In my experience, people of faith who believe that God is an all-powerful, divine, sovereign being with unlimited force and control feel betrayed by God when tragedies occur. They understand God to be an all-powerful entity with control over our destinies and so preventing major tragedies is expected and hoped for. Therefore, when overwhelming loss and sorrow occur, God is blamed and shunned. God allowed it, "he" abandoned us.

But one can also understand and experience God as an always-present, all-loving, divine energy, but not all-powerful entity. That is how Andy experiences God. That is how I experience God. For Andy, for me, for many of us, God is always near but God does not dictate human decisions or control human behaviors.

We believe that God cannot stop intruders from entering homes and killing innocent people, God does not send hurricanes that cause untold destruction, and God cannot stop planes from flying into towers.

The God I believe in and experience is all-loving but not all-powerful. This God is profound, present, loving, and strong but not omnipotent. The God of my understanding and experience, and I know Andy would agree, gave human beings freedom and autonomy, and does not control our individual behaviors and decisions, our past or our future.

Today we mark the sad anniversary of 9/11.

And today I want to remind us that God did not cause and could not prevent those attacks. God, all-loving and always present, was as horrified by the destruction as any of us and God's heart broke a million times over, just as ours did.

I want to remind us that just as we did ten years ago, we can again today turn to God for sustenance, support and guidance. We can ask God for comfort, we can lift our burdens and sorrows to God and know that our God makes a way out of no way. We can choose to TURN TOWARD God when disaster strikes rather TURNING AWAY from God and blaming God for the tragedies that occur in life.

God never promised us that our lives would be without sorrow and pain. God promised that God would be there when we faced sorrow and pain.

Andy took time this week to tell me how he endured his time of overwhelming loss. He said these words, "God gave me clarity on some life-saving things. I allowed myself to feel and process the pain, rather than seek to escape through alcohol or drugs. I was assured that my pain would not be that bad forever. And I realized it was okay to be mad at God, even as I acknowledged that it was not God's fault."

Andy also said that in his prayer life, God gave him this perspective: "Others had suffered as bad or worse, and were no more deserving of it than I or my family was." And he added, "I knew my wife and children were in a safe, loving place."

I knew I would eventually join them, and did not need to hasten that day. And I knew I needed to carry on for them our family values of community, love and faith."

Andy is also very expressive about how he could not have survived alone. Besides the incredible support of the people in his home church, Andy says these are some memories that he still cherishes: a neighboring UCC church sent him a bouquet of white roses; a Catholic parochial school class sent him cards; and a missionary in Honduras sent him a condolence card. Andy believes that God provided him with invaluable resources including a support group for survivors of homicide.

As we mark the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I cannot stop thinking about Andy and those who turn TOWARD GOD when tragedy strikes. I find myself repeating a simple prayer wishing that people of faith would understand and experience an all-loving, always-present God and turn TOWARD God when tragedies occur.

As a devoted person of faith who talks to God and experiences God's presence daily, I believe that on December 1, 1987, God could not prevent the killer from entering Andy's house. And on September 11, 2001, God could not prevent the planes from flying into the towers, the Pentagon, and the Pennsylvania field. But I know that God is present when horrific things

happen. God was and is present to Andy. And on 9/11, God was present, weeping with those who wept, whispering in the ears of those who cried out in pain and terror, comforting those who called out for God's presence in their final moments. That, I believe, is the power of divine presence.

Since 9/11, many who lost loved ones on that horrible day have turned to God and been strengthened-and been helped to carry on. Many have held onto promises in the Bible such as "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall strengthen thee."

Many have realized, even when pain is deep, that God is good and steadfast, always loving and always near. Many in their grief have remembered that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Many in their profound sorrow have said prayers of thanksgiving-while weeping-that God is near and because God is near, steady and loving, they can continue.

Listen again to our Scripture reading for today...

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-and great was its fall!'

This passage has helped Andy not just endure but carry on with a life filled with love, gratitude, and purpose.

And when I reflect on this moving passage today, as we mark 9/11, I think about how great was the fall...the fall of the towers.

Everything around us can crumble and fall...and great may be the fall...but if our lives are build on the solid rock of faith and a lived experience of God as a sure and steady presence in our lives, our lives will not crumble and fall.

Everything around us may come crashing down...and great may be the fall...but if we turn TOWARD God as a presence that can comfort and heal, soothe and support, we can and we will be sustained.

Andy's life came crashing down around him, the towers came crashing down in New York, the plane came crashing down in Pennsylvania field, another plane came crashing into the Pentagon-O great is the horror, the sorrow, the fear, the anger, the pain, the rage, the grief, the heartache, the anguish, O great is the fall.

But God is always there. God, the all-loving presence who holds us with care and walks with us into and through the valley of the shadow of death, is there.

Always there. And so, even in our pain, we are able to say:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens, God with me abide; When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.