The cries went to heaven. "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God!" The cries were too many for any but God to number.

The first I heard was that of Peter Jennings. He was shocked, horrified, in utter disbelief. As, with the nation, he watched the first tower collapse to the ground, all he could say was, "Good Lord!" That was all that there was to be said.

A woman who was later interviewed said, "All I could say was "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God." She explained to the reporter--"I kept repeating that, over and over, "Oh God."

Even prior to her interview, as we began to watch video footage that was both professional and of the home variety, as the terrorist crashed the plane into the second tower, we heard over and over, "Oh God, Oh my God!"

Then, of the many heartening things, people flock to church--the President of the United States at the National Cathedral, here in San Diego, and all across the nation. People flocking to church so that they can be with God--together.

Why?

The date was September 1, 1939. W. H. Auden, in New York City at the time, composed a poem by that title. The occasion? Hitler had just invaded Poland. Auden shared with fellow citizens of the world the burden of coming to grips with evil. Here is how his poem began:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odor of death
Offends the September night.

September 1, 1939 was by no means the end. Auden's horror was to compound. In November of that year, Auden was in a German-speaking section of Manhattan, in a movie theater, watching a documentary detailing the Nazi invasion of Poland. What horrified Auden even more than the invasion itself was that when Poles appeared on the screen, members of the audience began shouting, "Kill them! Kill them!"

To this point in his life, W. H. Auden had embraced a belief in the fundamental goodness of all people. He had taken the kind of goodness all of us have witnessed throughout this week--in the work of fire fighters and police officers, merchants giving away what people needed to survive, people lining up to give blood, volunteers asking, "How can I help?"--a goodness that is real and true and warms the heart. Auden had believed that this goodness was so fundamental that it thoroughly permeated all of us. The shock and horror that visited him in the movie theater as an unwelcome truth was his first awareness that humans are not completely or necessarily fundamentally good, that some humans can be up to much evil--even sheer evil--and that the world was desperately in need of some absolute--an absolute by which to measure the actions of Hitler, an absolute by which to condemn the atrocities he was perpetratiing. W. H. Auden discovered the need for an absolute by which he could declare Hitler utterly and completely wrong.

His problem was that he had worked so hard at convincing himself that so-called truth is relative--that there are no absolutes, that when it came to the condemnation of Hitler, he had no firm ground on which to stand. To his friends, W. H. Auden put it this way: "The English intellectuals who now cry to Heaven against the evil incarnated in Hitler have no Heaven to cry to."

W. H. Auden's intuition told him that his belief system was in complete conflict with a fundamental requirement not only that Adolph Hitler's actions be condemned, but damned. He knew that he had to take action to stop this absolute evil. It was a calling he could not deny. Bonhoffer said, "If I see that a madman is driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can't as a Christian simply wait, comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrest the steering wheel out of the hands of the madman." That is why this Christian pacifist resolved that he could only follow Jesus by returning from the United States to Germany and take responsibility for killing the madman himself. W. H. Auden knew instinctively that the evil he faced was so heinous that condemnation must be absolute.

Sociologist Peter Berger calls this a signal of transcendence. He says that "our sense of what is humanly permissible is so fundamentally outraged that the only adequate response to the offense as well as to the offender seems to be a curse of supernatural dimensions." It involves the realization that our judgment must express condemnation that is absolute and certain. It is the knowledge that for our judgment to be merely human and arguable is itself an offense against God's goodness and creation. It recognizes some crimes to be so horrific, so atrocious, that our judgment that they are so can never be relative or idiosyncratic. For us to fail to recognize that
they are so atrocious that they require damnation is itself an offence against the ability to make sound judgments that God has given to us with their requisite responsibility.

That is why, throughout the week, we have instinctively cried to heaven. As Peter Berger puts is, "Deeds that cry out to heaven also cry out for hell."

This is what brought people to churches. This is what brought our President, Billy Graham, and hundreds of other dignitaries to our National Cathedral. It's also why we've instinctively cried to heaven. Evil people have perpetrated atrocities that are an offense to God, to justice, and to the fabric of life itself. We have rightfully responded with cries to heaven.

W. H. Auden discovered what Abraham Lincoln discovered before and during the Civil War: a house divided against itself cannot stand. When it came to judging atrocities, Auden discovered that he himself was divided and his own division posed a serious problem.

Our son, David, had to come to grips with this division. It seems certain that our cell phone bill will be higher than usual as a result. Our two children--both away at college--felt the need to keep in close touch and talk. They have a mutual friend who attends NYU--a mere 14 blocks from Ground Zero, the place where the Twin Towers of the World trade Center stood. In one of David's phone calls, he wanted to wax theological. I love it when either David or Jaime shares what is on their heart in the deepest of ways.

He asked me why he should pray. Please understand. Dave is a great prayer, but like so many others, he was feeling helpless and vulnerable. His best 'guy' friend is 14 blocks from Ground Zero. Shortly after the attack on America, David and Daryl were talking on the phone. David called me afterward and said, "I feel so helpless. It's not that I don't want to pray. It would just help me to understand.

What do you say to your son? I said, 'Bud, it's important to understand that just like you, I don't know why this happened. It's not likely that either of us, in this lifetime, will ever fully comprehend what it means.

There is only One who understands--God, the Uncreated Complete Being. Uncreated and Complete, God alone understands and knows why.

That's why we pray. We pray to God because God understands. We pray to God because God understands Why. We trust God. I don't know why--but I know why I trust God. God is trustworthy and the only One who knows Why.

We pray because God is God. We pray to God because we remember that we are not God. Because of that, I don't have to worry or concern myself with any false effort to be God or play God.

Why pray? Because the perpetrators of this violence are anything but people of prayer. They have instead spared no effort to usurp God's rightful place in the world. Their design is to make themselves superior to all others, and in so doing, they have perpetrated sheer, bald-faced atrocities of evil in the most contemptuous of ways without one molecule of courage inasmuch as all of their actions are covert. These perpetrators have unilaterally exempted themselves from any public adjudication of their actions during the meticulous planning process for this conspiracy and the terror it sought to unleash.

Perpetrators of terror are united in evil. We have seen that in Osama bin Ladin's congratulating those who executed this atrocity--which both killed innocent people and turned children into orphans. It is essential--in fact, critical--that the people of God and the United States of America be united for justice and united for the good. It's essential that the people of God be united in our reverence for the Uncreated Complete Being who created this beautiful world for justice. This is so because a house divided cannot stand. If evil stands united, only in the unity of unconditional, prayerful commitment to God can we be instruments of God's goodness. Then we will be
instruments of peace, love and joy--the ends for which God created us.

It is essential as the country moves through grief towards justice that we unite behind God's absolute goodness lest our human efforts to restore justice--which are fallible because they are human--degenerate into passions of hatred and vengeance. First, this means we must persist in our vigilance over our own motives lest we fail to continue to stand in love with Arab Americans. Standing united for the good means that people of God cannot become people of hatred. It also means that our continued calling is to recognize that the burden of this atrocity for Arab Americans doubles when they both grieve for the evil perpetrated against our nation while themselves becoming the targets and victims of hatred.

It means that God calls us to remember what Bonhoeffer knew: that the goal of justice is to rid the world of evil. It entails our remembering that the world has a design that is moral in character. It is critical to remember that we who seek justice and the restoration of the world to God's moral order are ourselves fallen people whose motives are vulnerable to pollution.

We must begin efforts to rid our country of evil at the very place where Dr. Martin Luther King began--with the ideals on which the nation was founded. What Dr. King in his wisdom recognized with stark clarity in the 50's and 60's is that the evil perpetrated against African Americans was an affront to the ideals on which America was built. When he gave his greatest speeches, Dr. King went back to July 4, 1776, to words penned by Thomas Jefferson--which conveyed the truth on which Dr. King's prophetic words stood. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Just as Dr. King recognized that these ideals constituted a promisory note whose time for cashing had come, so should our efforts to secure justice recognize that the atrocities of September 11, 2001 were not only an attack on the victims of these atrocities, but also a direct assault on the fundamental ideals on which this nation was founded. As with Dr. King, it's critical that the aim of justice not be vengeance--which belongs solely to the Lord--but the eradication of evil and threats to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In our nation's pursuit of justice, it is essential that we bear in mind the wisdom of James Madison who, in The Federalist No. 15, recognized that the obstacles to justice include the very fallibilities of those who rightfully seek it. He cautions us with these words: "So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities that, where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts." Both James Madison and Dr. King recognized that the pursuit of justice must begin and end in the humility of the seekers of justice as we bow before the One who is without judge.

The President of the United States rightly stated that we are in the middle period of our grief. He also more than intimated that we are at the beginning of the pursuit of justice. Both raise an all-important question. Where do we go from here? How do we unite behind the Good-- fully recognizing our own fallibility and propensity for degenerating into mutual animosity?

We can do so by remembering with G. K. Chesterton that the best of patriotism consists not in the defiant declaration, "I am an American." We cannot afford to think ourselves superior as Adolph Hitler thought his own race superior. What we can pray for is this: "May I be worthy of America. May we be worthy of justice and the ideals for which we stand together.

We can accomplish that by remembering, as the nation did this week, that our Lord knows what it is to absorb and suffer violence. That is precisely what he did on the Cross. He knew his calling at the time--the hinge of history--was to absorb the evil and violence of the world into himself. To that end, he suffered in ways beyond description. As we absorb violence and suffering, we have a Lord who is with all those who suffer. We worship a Lord who says, "I am with you in your suffering." That's what our Lord declares with his open arms on the Cross.
The woman with the hemorrhage in the 5th chapter of Mark knew instinctively that she could reach out to Jesus. She had suffered for twelve years--enduring pain and agony inside of herself. She had been ostracized from her community which regarded her as unclean. On top of that, she had sought relief from physicians who, instead of offering her help, had worsened her condition--taking all of her money in the process.

What did she do? In her pain, in her suffering, in her indescribable, protracted agony, she reached out to Jesus. Silently, she cried to Jesus. Hopeless, she extended her hand to touch only the hem of his garment.

When she did that, the healing, loving power of Jesus flowed into her--drying up the bleeding, soothing the pain, and relieving her suffering--which Jesus alone could understand.

Subsequent to bringing her prayer, "Give me Jesus," to completion by touching him, Jesus completed it by telling her the absolute truth: "You are mine. I am with you. You are a member of my family." He did so simply. He called her "Daughter."

We are already answering the call of God--we are already standing united in the absolute good when we fulfill our cries to heaven by reaching out to and loving each other within the open arms of Jesus.

This friend of our children, Daryl, whose dormitory is 14 blocks from Ground Zero, called our son David, his best friend. Daryl is an African American man who graduated from high school with our daughter, Jaime. He's an acting student at New York University. Four years ago, when Jaime directed our church's production of Godspell, she cast Daryl in the role of Jesus. Right after the crash of the two hijacked planes into the Twin Towers, Daryl called his buddy. His cries were as fully human as those who cried directly to heaven. Not knowing whether the terror would continue or end, he said to Dave, over and over, "I love you, man. I don't know what else to say. I love you, man."

That is what the church, nation and world have been doing during these times of our grief. We've been crying to heaven. With our Lord, we have been opening our arms to each other. In the days ahead, it's essential that we continue to do so--for the pursuit of justice in the interest of the ideals for which we stand may ultimately prove to be even more difficult than our efforts to love those who suffer.

As Children of God, let us always prove ourselves worthy by persevering in love. May we be worthy of America. May we be worthy to pursue the justice that is God's design and our calling. May we do so ever mindful of the way in which Abraham Lincoln concluded his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."