**Tammeus notes for 9-19-21 class at 1st Pres, Lake Forest**

Good morning. Thank you for sticking around after worship to talk about a subject that drives me a little crazy — religious extremism and what we can do about it.

Before we do, however, I want to celebrate the fact that today is the birthday of one of the grandchildren of my sister Mary. Grayson today turns 14. So if you’ll let me get out my phone and record you singing happy birthday to him, I’ll make sure he sees it. Ready? Thanks.

I want to use most of our time together today to have a conversation with you and answer your questions and comments about my new book. But I do want to note that this is actually an appropriate day to be talking about extremism, whether rooted in religion or something else. For we saw a major example of it in the news on this date in 1995. Anyone know what that might have been?

On Sept. 19, 1995, the manifesto of the Unabomber was published in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. As you may or may not remember, the Unabomber was a man who, for 17 years, had been sending homemade bombs through the mail that had killed and maimed innocent people around the United States. After reading the manifesto in print that day, David Kaczynski linked the writing style to that of his older brother Ted, who was later convicted of the attacks and sentenced to life in prison without parole. All told, the Unabomber was responsible for murdering three people and injuring another 23.

Kaczynski wasn’t a religious terrorist, but he was so convinced of his version of truth about industrial society and its evils that he was moved to commit unspeakable crimes.

So, speaking about acting on beliefs that don’t allow any doubts, I want to tell you a bit about how I came to write my latest book, *Love, Loss and Endurance*. But to do that I want to back up a bit to the book I wrote just before this one, a book called *The Value of Doubt: Why Unanswered Questions,* Not *Unquestioned Answers, Build Faith*.

My argument in that book was that doubt can be a legitimate road to faith. In fact, I suggested that if you’re not part of a faith community that allows you to ask the hard questions about faith, you’ll never find a faith that can sustain you in good times and in bad. What we had in the 9/11 terrorists were people who entertained no doubts at all. Rather, they knew all the answers before they even heard the questions.

By the way, [a new study](https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-05-13/polarization) from Brown University suggests that political polarization is often a result of an intolerance of uncertainty. It’s true of people who describe themselves as liberal and those who describe themselves as conservative, researchers found. One of the researchers put it this way: “This shows that some of the animosity and misunderstanding we see in society is not due to irreconcilable differences in political beliefs, but instead depends on surprising — and potentially solvable — factors such as the uncertainty people experience in daily life.” The problem, then, is that people dislike uncertainty, paradox, mystery -- anything but clear and concise answers and outcomes. And yet what is life if not the playing out of uncertainty, paradox, mystery and ambiguity? We need to find ways to teach people how to live with uncertainty without degenerating into simplistic thinking.

So let me tell you how I learned about the murder of my and Mary’s nephew the morning of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was still an editorial page columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, and it was my habit to arrive at the desk in my cubicle shortly after 7 a.m. each day. I had a 13-inch TV on my desk that often was on but with the sound muted. I’d usually tune into CNBC first thing when I arrived just to see where the stock market was headed that day.

Before long that Tuesday morning, I noticed that something unusual was happening on the screen, so I listened for a minute and then flipped over to CNN to see what else I could learn.

When the shape of what was happening was clearer, *Star* editors decided to publish the first extra edition of *The Star* since I had started work there in September 1970. And they asked me to write the lead commentary piece for that edition. Which meant I had about an hour and a half to cobble together 800 or so words that would try to say something intelligent to our readers about this madness.

Just before I started writing the column, I punched some buttons on my desk phone to prevent it from ringing and interrupting me. By doing that, I forwarded my calls to our editorial page secretary, Trudy Hurley.

“Unless it’s my wife,” I told her, “please just take messages for me until I finish this.” (Voicemail on *The Star’s* phone system was in the future.)

When I was about two-thirds of the way through writing the column, Trudy slipped into my cubicle, put a hand on my shoulder gently and said almost in a whisper, “It’s your wife. She needs to talk with you.”

Marcia simply asked: “Have you read your sister’s email?” I hadn’t.

“Please read it,” she said. And was gone.

Although that sounds like a simple assignment, the terribly out-of-date technology then available to us in the *Star* newsroom meant that I had to log out of a separate word-composition program and log into Windows — into Windows 3.0, as I recall, which had been succeeded by Windows 3.1 in 1992 and by Windows 95 in 1995 and, thus, was years behind the update curve. It was a maddeningly slow process and on this day it seemed both morose and glacial to someone on deadline.

When I finally got my email system open, I found a note from my sister, Barbara Fyfe, with this subject line: “Very bad news.”

It simply said that from what she and her husband Jim could tell from their home in North Carolina, their son, my nephew, Karleton Douglas Beye Fyfe, who lived in the Boston suburb of Brookline, was a passenger on the first plane, American Flight 11, to crash into the World Trade Center. This disastrous possibility had not yet been confirmed, but everything pointed to it being true — as it turned out to be.

My heart fractured into millions of serrated pieces. Karleton and I, after all, had developed an especially close relationship.

When Karleton died, he was 31 years old, married and the father of a 19-month-old boy. The Sunday before he left Boston on that Tuesday to fly to California for a business meeting (he was a bond analyst with John Hancock), his wife Haven had told him that she was pregnant again. That baby, Parker, was born in May 2002, and of course never had a chance even to meet his father.

That same Sunday, Sept. 9, I got an email from Karleton with a picture of his son Jackson sitting in a bucket on a beach. I laughed. Two days later I cried.

Why did Karleton die? He died because 19 hijackers had bought into the wildly bogus ideas that Osama bin Laden and others had taught them, which included the delusion that God wanted them to murder people to punish the United States for a series of alleged sins. Bin Laden and his followers claimed to be Muslims, but their curdled theology had twisted Islam beyond recognition in much the same way that the Ku Klux Klan and today’s current batch of white Christian nationalists bend Christianity into an unrecognizable mess.

And that, too, is what I write about in this new book. Through a series of short interludes as well as a longer chapter on the theological roots of extremism, I point to case after case of rigid, magical thinking that has led to violence, from the Holocaust to the murders of Black people at Mother Emmanuel Church in South Carolina to the 2014 murders of the son and father of my friend Mindy Corporon and the wife of my friend Jim LaManno by a neo-Nazi in the Kansas City area. Mindy, by the way, has written the afterword for the book. And one of this country’s best-known and wisest Muslims, Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core (with headquarters in Chicago), also has written an endorsement blurb for the book that you’ll find on the back cover.

I, of course, had no idea that when we set Jan. 19 as the publication date for this book it would be less than two weeks after extremists would engage in insurrection at our nation’s Capitol. The rioters, we now know, included followers of the QAnon conspiracy theorists, the white nationalist hate group known as the Proud Boys, other white supremacists carrying Confederate flags and members of other radical hate groups.

And did you hear what former President George W. Bush said about those extremists and others like them in his excellent speech on the 20th anniversary last weekend of 9/11? He said this:

“There is little cultural overlap between violent extremists abroad and violent extremists at home. But in their disdain for pluralism, in their disregard for human life, in their determination to defile national symbols, they are children of the same foul spirit. And it is our continuing duty to confront them.”

I put it this way: Both the Capitol Hill rioters and the 9/11 hijackers bought into lies, whether political or theological, that wound up costing people their lives.

In my book’s last chapter, I try to suggest various approaches that you and I can adopt to try to stand against such extremism. And I hope readers will spend some time thinking about those approaches and what might work for them.

Among those ideas are these: All of us should become more religious literate and we should engage somehow in interfaith dialogue and other work with people from traditions not our own. How do you do that? Well, you can start by taking the initiative and visiting houses of worship representing traditions beyond Christianity. In my experience, people who worship in those spaces are almost always eager for visitors. They want you to know about them and their ways of worshiping and living.

Where to start? Do you know about a nearby mosque called the Islamic Foundation North? It’s at 1751 South O’Plaine Road in Libertyville. Heck, Mary and I drove here this morning all the way from Libertyville. So how hard could it be to find that? Or in case you’re curious about Judaism, how about visiting Temple Beth-El synagogue at 3610 Dundee Road in Northbrook? Want, instead, to visit a Sikh gurdwara, or temple? There’s the Sikh Religious Society at 1280 Winnetka St. in Palatine. Or how about the beautiful Baha’i Temple at 100 Linden Avenue in Wilmette? Surely some of you have been there, right? Or there’s the Hindu temple at 20444 West Peterson Road in Grayslake. It took me about four minutes online to find these places, so you can do that, too.

And if you want to work with some folks who already are doing this kind of interreligious work in this area there’s the **Northwest Suburban Interfaith Council, which has offices in Buffalo Grove.**

I’d *like* to say that I’m profoundly optimistic that if you visit some of all of these sites and you use other ideas I’ve recommended in my book to unplug extremism, the world will turn into a peaceful place in just a few weeks. But I have read history and I know better. And yet I think we must be inspired and guided by such people as Martin Luther King Jr., who kept bearing witness to the truth even when he knew it might cost him his life, as of course it did.

At the end of W. H. Auden’s famous poem, “September 1, 1939,” he acknowledges that he is beleaguered by “negation and despair,” and yet he asks that he may be strong enough to “show an affirming flame.” That, too, is my prayer for all of us as we confront this darkness.

This is my seventh book, including two that had co-authors. Each book provided a different writing experience from the one before or after it. Our book about Polish rescuers in the Holocaust took Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn and me about four and a half years to write. Other books took much less time for various reasons. This new book took me, in a sense, almost 20 years to write. Which is to say that I’ve been saving emails, letters, notes, blogs and columns on this subject since 9/11 happened, not sure what I’d eventually do with all those files.

In the end, I decided I was obligated to tell this story in part because I’m one of the few professional journalists whose family was directly affected by 9/11. I know of only one other, Mike Casey, and Mike worked at *The Star* at the time, too. One of Mike’s cousins died that day in the Pentagon. Not everyone in my extended family wanted me to write this book. Karleton’s parents, his widow and one of his sisters gave me either permission or encouragement or both. But his other sister didn’t want it written, partly because she didn’t want to deal with media again and partly because she believed I would simply profit off her brother’s death. So that was one more complication the terrorists threw at our family.

Before I turn to your comments and questions, I’d like to read part of a chapter that I hope will give you a small sense of what my family lost when Karleton died. As I do that, please think not just about Mary’s and *my* family but also the almost 3,000 other families who were devastated by death that malevolent day and the thousands and thousands of other families who have gone through this kind of trauma because of other terrorist attacks — some of them faith-based — around the world since then, including the Jan. 6 loss of life at our Capitol Building.

(Chapter 21, through “pants.” On page 162.)

Well, that’s a good place to stop, except to add that I obviously still miss Karleton, including his completely random emails to me that always seemed to arrive when I needed a lift. One message that I got more than once said simply this: “Hey. Did I ever tell you how tall and handsome I am?” That was it. He *was* both tall and handsome. I’m 6-3 and a half and Karleton ended up 6-5, so I looked up to him in more ways than one. But now, let’s get to your questions and comments.