

9/11, the Psalms, and Peace: An Interview with Professor Luonne Rouse

Frank Kaufmann
September 27, 2021
Lightly edited transcript



Professor Luonne Rouse offers thoughts and hope on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the US homeland

Frank Kaufmann

Good morning, thank you very much for being with us today. It's a special day for me, it's a special day for all of us. It's 9/11, the 20th anniversary of the attack on the US homeland and a time around which Americans of every stripe, tall and short, left and right unite to honor the lives lost, and especially the first responders and those who sacrifice themselves in the natural impulse of goodness that is buried in every human heart and soul. We're here to honor the beauty of American life and the American heart as demonstrated on this day and throughout many days after.

Unexpectedly to me, I have a tremendous pleasure, honor and opportunity today. It is just from a prior appointment, as we were looking for time to meet. And here it is. On this very day of great importance to our national life.

I am with Professor Luonne Rouse. A real and honest bio of the man would take all day. But I've picked three important aspects of his work: Professor Rouse has been a civil rights activist for his entire adult life. He was intimately involved with Dr. King, and remained throughout the trajectory of this movement, up til the present time. He's presently a professor of theology. And most importantly perhaps (at least in the moment), Professor Rouse is the National Co Chair of the American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLC), an organization of great influence throughout the United States, and now becoming influential in the world at large, as work among American clergy starts to reach clergy, internationally, other parts of the world as well. I've spoken too long, by way of introduction. But Dr. Ross, thanks very much for doing this with me today.

Luonne Rouse

It's good to be with you. I have been an admirer of your work, in the things that you do for the interfaith, and for the journey that we're on going through life.

Frank

Thank you, we can talk about a million things as we often do, you and I. But today, I would just like to have the word of your heart and the word of your wisdom, especially on this very day of the 9/11 commemoration. I sprung this interview on you, I didn't call you a week or two in advance to have you put thoughts and preparation together. But I didn't want to miss the chance to hear from you. I always

learn from you, and I know our listeners will as well. Let's just start. What is this day? Tell us something we should think about,

Dr. Rouse

We should never forget to remember those who suffered for us, in actuality, and unexpectedly. Their lives took on great impact into the mindsets of all those not close to them, but also took on a deep lasting, eternal sorrow for those who are close. So part of what we ought to remember when thinking about the sacrifice given for us, expected or unexpected, leaves in our world there are still those who suffer the ill from that which is never to be intended by God. So with Jesus Christ, it was so all who have sacrificed willingly or unwillingly, and some of us benefit from it. But there are those who are really there at heart with them who are broken.

Frank

It's a very deep point, and helpful to bring our hearts to that place. We can't be careless when there are those around us still suffering and will forever from the events of this day. The people to whom you refer are of two sorts, one are the victims who were simply doing their day's work, went to work, went to their office and lost their lives in the attack. And then there were the first responders that raced up into a collapsing high rise, one of the tallest in the world, almost guaranteed to their death, just just to save any single life they could find and they lost their lives as well. So there are two types of victims, not victims. I don't want to call them victims. But there are two types of loss of life in this tragic event on this day of commemoration. I think you're calling our heart-attention toward those who survive the loss of their son, the loss of their daughter, or their mom or dad, this is what you've asked us to remember.

Dr. Rouse

That's right. Yes, those who are referred to off times when I pray to God, "the living suffering." They suffer while living here. They will be in that suffering until the day when they themselves ascend, unless there's some miraculous healing of that, that I cannot see. I'm too small to see. And I'm of the mindset that God is suffering with them. God did not desire that. God is brokenhearted. What is has taken place, and hopefully with our understanding all of them, we are helping to heal the heart of God, especially if we understand it in a way to make things better, then we take on a path towards the beauty and goodness of creation, instead of thinking think that we've got to stay in that condition. And so this thing has a two pronged situation for me when I'm praying, and that has to do on one hand, with those who still come to this day. And I'm grateful to them for reading the names of the 3000 that we know, with this right here in New York, that were killed. But that continues us in that deepness of grief, in the midst of pain. And maybe over generations, it will be able to be done and done appropriately as a remembrance, and a celebrated story of life remembrance. But right now, it is still too dear, to let go of the pain and agony and the suffering. And then the other part of it is those of us who are living in that suffering, as a reminder to step towards where it's better to clear this path in a way where it shouldn't happen again,

Frank

Very good. So as you speak, and remind us of whom you called the living suffering, there are two things that we can consider doing with our lives. One is to always be ready and caring, and attentive to and embracing the living suffering, not be so coarse or crude or distracted, that we're not compassionate and ready to have solidarity and loving human relationship. In case we don't know who are even among us. Right? We might, they might be sitting next to us, right next to us in the subway. And so as always, we should be alert and sensitive. Interpersonal compassion is something that improves us and maybe they can feel something, or maybe a word might be exchanged. We never know. We have to be ready and alert and carry this in our hearts. We might end up as the one whom God calls to give a word. And then they know that people are aware, and are sensitive. Then the other thing is, we also have to live in such a way toward making it less and less possible that these things happen in the world. That's an entirely different type of commitment.

Dr. Rouse

That that's correct. And one other thing that comes to my mind every year at this time is that we never know who we are with, at the final moment of our existence. We could be together today, and I won't see any other person. You might be the last person that I see and face to face, and be able to talk to in person. And that has meaning. We may never know the fullness of that meaning because we don't know the real essence of these moments. But we should live each moment as a moment of value. The person that we're with, as though it is the last moment that we have an opportunity to make a contribution. Those who were on the plane that day. did not know that they were boarding a plane to make their last contribution, but their last contribution is one from that time on the plane. That's going to be forever and ever, not only the ones who were in the building that the plane hit, but the ones that were in the plane, as well. So I hope that we value our present existence enough to value those we interact with. Somewhere, and that is to

hope that if that can be sincere within us, and it becomes sincere in the hearts of those who consider themselves to be our enemies, even though we may not consider them to be our enemies. Yes. So if we are going to end all of this bitterness and hatred, somehow, we need to start within ourselves to value loving the other enough to call a halt to hatred, and call up all of the power that we can engender, towards one another. That equates to true love that has such importance.

Frank

That's really profound, Professor. You got me on that one. It's almost as though you've said enough to make the whole world heaven. Just in that observation alone. Imagine that you're on that plane, a normal everyday plane. You fly all the time. And this is just another one. The girl or the young fella comes by with your drink, your meal. And are you nice? Are you mean? Are you nasty? It might be your last day! So we need to start to have that sensitivity. That's enough to create heaven right there! If everybody started that. That's a very deep observation. I'm very grateful to hear it.

Before we started taping, you were telling me that you've always made an effort to have a commemoration or something related to this day, over the course of your ministry. Can you tell us what you were describing

Dr. Rouse

in 2011, I was inspired, having served in the military as a chaplain for over 20 years, to really look at how we are responding to what took place on 9/11 of 2001. And what came to me later, after contemplating that day -- I was in my pastoral office at the Huntington United Methodist Church -- I went into deep thought. And what came to me was that we're not going to defeat terrorism by traditional military means. So I became inspired to every day read a Psalm, and pray against terrorism, and for the making a world of peace, asking that this be divinely carried out.

Frank

You're doing this as a military chaplain?

Dr. Rouse

No, I was already out in the military. But I was reflecting from my mindset as a chaplain earlier that morning. And this was in the afternoon when this thought came to me. So I committed myself and decided that I would start every year on 9/11, and I would invite everybody together to read through a Psalm, and pray for 150 days in unison together, asking God to intervene with us. Those of us who are known by faith to be with God, and therefore God dwelling within us, we band together, and that the greater way to defeat terrorism is to reach into the heart of everybody, so we come in unity. And we're reading to the Psalms and praying against terrorizing one another, and seeking the love of God within our hearts. That is the road towards world peace. John Kennedy used to call it cooperative peace. As you and I know that those who are deeply committed to God's will and God's true love. So to return to the original intention of God, that we might follow the command of God. And God says that if we love those commands, then we are loving God. And that those of us who keep those commands God's loving us. So the intention of coming to this day every year in starting with Psalm 1. and then reading through that, inviting others to read through that with us. And then I share a prayer along with that reading every day for world peace.

Frank

Wow, wow.

Dr. Rouse

Usually every year, I add an aspect to it. I spoke with a Rabbi one day, and that Rabbi reminded me that this is a powerful thing. He said, "You do it every day?" I said, "Yeah, I know. I'm committed to doing it. We need to begin to teach every man." He says, "You don't know how powerful this is! God has called you to bring an understanding to the world that really will lead to world peace." So let's keep doing that. Study together and keep calling people to it. So I do.

This year I invited Miri Kumar. She was my student at UTS, the Unification Theological Seminary, and she has since left America, but she taught Hebrew. When I was teaching her at seminary, at the Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church in Harlem. She would teach Hebrew. So I asked her if she would do a reading in Hebrew for the verses every day? This year as a part of that to unity. Those of us who are Jews and Christians, those who are Muslim, and other religions too. All of us. Somehow, we'll get back somewhere along the line of going back to the original voices, original languages that spoke to us. So today, as I was reading, Psalm 1 read, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of

the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." That essentially is what this is all about. And Mir spoke it in Hebrew. If you don't mind, share those words.

Frank

Please do. I'd love that.

[Psalm 1 and 2 recited in Hebrew]

Dr. Rouse

Dr. Kaufmann, I've always admired your work. You always call us to be one people. Your studies, your research, you're sharing from your mind, from your experiences, from your home, and from your heart. I thank you for this. I'm so appreciative to have this opportunity to share with you because, from your work, I truly believe we will become one family.

Frank

Thank you Professor. I am grateful to hear this. We stand shoulder to shoulder and arm and arm are walking with deadly seriousness to lift off the burdens from people. To allow us to see the beauty in one another, and to fall in love with one another. You've given us a ton of great food for thought. And you've also given us a movement of peace to join, which lasts half a year. 150 days. Maybe when people discover that God comes to earth through such communal dedication, devotion, prayer and study, someone will start the other 150 days and we'll be on track together. Right?

Thank you so much for doing this brief conversation together. It will mean a lot for me in all the days to come, but also in all the years to come. Thank you. Thanks for being on this call. God bless.