

Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost

*Proper 19, Year A
September 11, 2011*

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All of us have our memories of the morning ten years ago. I remember yelling to my wife, who was in the shower, that the morning news showed the World Trade Center on fire after a plane had flown into it. As I was telling her I watched the second plane hit, and we spent the next hour and a half in horror and tears. In my mind was Herbert Morrison's broadcast of the explosion of the Hindenburg, "Oh the humanity!"

That day at church was spent with a TV on in the reception area and comforting the people who dropped in. I think we had evening prayers that day, but what I remember was that on the next night our clergy association pulled together a service for the whole community. We met in a shared worship service in which the various clergy took their turns – a Roman Catholic priest, several Protestant pastors, a Mormon Bishop, two Rabbi's, Bahai and Christian Science lay leaders, a psychotherapist Muslim, and a Jewish cantor to lead us in a psalm of lamentation. The LDS church where we met was packed, and somehow those attending managed to craft cookies and cakes and punch so that we could have a coffee hour after the prayers.

There are many opportunities to get teary and moved by grief, even ten years later. But the horror of such hatred also disclosed our better angels. There were the passengers of flight 93 who sacrificed their own lives to prevent another use of a jet plane as a weapon. There were the Port Authority workers Pablo Ortiz and Frank di Martini who climbed up the stairs of the North Tower while others were heading down. By climbing as high as the 91st floor, Frank and Pablo rescued more than 70 additional people who were otherwise trapped behind closed doors. Some of those 70 took time to search other floors on their way down the stairs, bringing another dozen to safety. Frank and Pablo started down too late and were still in the tower as it came down.

There were the strangers who stopped to help the injured, strangers who simply paused to comfort one another in the midst of the awfulness. People volunteered to take turns around the clock at ground zero to do nothing but give the rescue workers standing ovations as they entered or left the clean up site. St. Paul's Episcopal Church, miraculously spared in the explosive concussion of the tower collapses, dedicated itself to being a station for hospitality and rest for those same workers. And in the small community of Mercer Island, 500 people of different faiths met together to reflect and weep and pray and enjoy a cookie or two.

This is who we are. This is who we are. Our elected officials should be ashamed to degrade the spirit of our nation's people with their pettiness

and posturing. Those who seek political and financial advantage through hateful projections and fear-fostering exaggerations should be ashamed. For we are the people who stand firm when we hear the noble phrases of our historical conscience:

- ❖ All people are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. (*Thomas Jefferson*)
- ❖ It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. (*Abraham Lincoln*)
- ❖ Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life, a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. (*Franklin D. Roosevelt*)
- ❖ I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. (*John F. Kennedy*)
- ❖ With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. (*Martin Luther King, Jr.*)
- ❖ Let us let our own children know that we will stand against the forces of fear. When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life. As St. Paul admonished us, Let us "not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (*William J. Clinton*)
- ❖ A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. Tonight, I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened. And I pray they will be comforted by a Power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: Even though I walk through the

valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me. (*George W. Bush*)

Ten years ago I was given the chance to close our interfaith gathering with a blessing, and I close today with these same words for you.

With what could I bless you in the midst of this week?

I can bless you with your self. It is no accident that you are here, or that you are who you are. You are not your own possession, but you are made by powers greater than yourself. You are forged by what you remember and you are made whole by what you love. Take stock of who you are, and give thanks to all that is holy and divine for the fact that you are here.

I can bless you with your neighbor. None of us is meant to be alone, for our creator has made us to be part of families and communities and friends. The neighbors who sit beside you in this place are from God to care for you, and you are to care for them.

I can bless you with true sorrow. What we have seen and heard tears our hearts open, and we are filled with grief. We see in the news pictures of things too horrifying to imagine, and we know that people are suffering great terror and great pain and great loss and death. In that moment we know we are connected to them by an intimate thread in our common humanity, and it breaks our hearts. Do not confuse this deep sadness with a false sense that revenge can ever be healing, or with the false hope that through violence we can somehow regain control of our lives and the world. But simply feel the sorrow of our God as he sees us in such misery, and weep honest tears.

I bless you with our children, for they are fountains of hope and springs of compassion in our human family. Across every race and nationality, across every belief and every dividing line, the face of a child draws from our hearts sympathy and compassion. In them we see our own deep seated longing for goodness and innocence, in them we are reminded of the common hopes and desires of every mother and father, and in their young and brightening faces we can imagine being free of hatred and animosity.

I bless you with life. You are not among those who have died. The God who has brought you to this day has given you a life to live and a purpose to fulfill. Fear and grief are true emotions, but vitality and energy and living fully are the signs that we have given ourselves to the source of life, and that we draw every breath with gratitude and gladness.

I bless you with joy. As horrible as these attacks have been and as they weigh so heavily upon our spirits, they have not overcome what is good and lovely in this life. Take stock of what you have to be thankful for, and do not begrudge yourself or others the simple honesty of a smile or laugh.

I bless you with hope. The source of life from which your life is drawn, from which every human life takes its form and shape, is not quenched or diminished by violence or death or fear. There is no distance you could go, no depths you could plumb, that could carry you beyond the grasp and loving eye of the one who made you.

I bless you with love. In all of our various scriptures the message is given that the true power by which the world can be changed is the power of love. It shall never be the sword or the hateful word that prove to be the most powerful influence in this world. It shall be the love with which we treat our neighbors and the compassion we show to one another that shall ultimately make the world what it could be. I bless you with the challenge to find the resolve to love the person you sit beside, to love those you meet in the market and on the street and in the school, the resolve to love the stranger you meet in any given moment of your life. This is the resolve through which the world can truly be transformed, through which violence and bigotry shall be brought to an end, and through which beacons of light shall shine in the darkness.

Amen.