

SERMON: 16 Pentecost September 13, 2015 Year B

Pausing to Remember: September 11, 2001

Today we prayed the Collect for Remembrance. We remember what our nation experienced on September 11, 2001. It is well worth it spiritually to pause our normal routine and activities to reflect and remember. It is well worth it spiritually to continue to pray for peace and understanding among all nations and peoples. It is well worth it spiritually to recognize that the peace and understanding for which we pray begins with us: with you and me, and with our own families.

Thursday night a young man and I were remembering where we were and what we were doing on that fateful Friday morning. He was at an Episcopal college. I was Senior Chaplain at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

His memory was of going into a class—Critical Thinking—and being told by the professor that something was going on, that no one was sure exactly what, and that the best thing they could do is have class. The young man did not agree, left the classroom and riveted himself to the TV screen as most of us did that day. I believe I would have done the same thing as he did.

I was driving down Walnut Grove Road in Memphis toward school. I heard about the first plane as I listened to the radio. It didn't seem real, but I found myself accelerating my car to get to school fast. I parked quickly, ran into my office where I had a television set. My colleagues on the administrative team and I gathered around the screen in shock. We knew the first and best thing to do was to gather the community together in the Chapel. Fortunately, we had Chapel every day, so we did not have to do anything unusual to have people come together for prayer. We had Chapel every day at an appointed time. (Thank God for Episcopal Schools!)

That chapel service was the single best response any of us could have had. We invited the clergy from our associated church to be involved. Parents,

faculty and students seemed to come from everywhere. The large sanctuary was overflowing. The shock was palpable. We were on our knees, literally and metaphorically, along with the rest of the nation.

Within hours of the Chapel service, I got word that one of our fifth grader's father was in the tower when it dissolved. He worked for Morgan Stanley, commuting every week from Memphis to Manhattan. That little girl's face of grief will never leave me. Nor will that of the Hindu high school girl who found out her aunt and uncle were among those who perished. Oh, just the memories of those two dear children bring hot tears to my eyes writing this.

My young friend with whom I was talking the other night had commented that September 11 event for his age group was their Kennedy event. For those of us who have lived longer, we say, "yes," and we also remember the day President Kennedy was assassinated, and way too many other tragic events surrounding the Civil Rights struggle. Those born earlier in the twentieth century will, of course, remember Pearl Harbor and know exactly what they were doing on that day, at the hour they learned of the attack.

Human history is replete with such moments, in every age and every nation. We can only absorb so much psychologically; however we cannot afford to ignore the events of the world, even though it may be painful to do so. Our Christianity compels us ask the question: "Am I leading *my* life in a way which contributes measures of peacefulness or am I leading my life in a way which begets conflict and discord?"

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It is a cliché that charity begins at home. It is a cliché which happens to be full of truth, however. It is also true that peacefulness begins at home. When

peace is compromised at home—when parents fight and forget the effects on the children—when anger dominates over respectful behavior—when the virtues of quiet, peaceful discussion are forgotten in the rush of everyday life—then peacefulness is hard to find.

The word “home,” comes to mind as we think about peacefulness. Most people crave an oasis at home...a place to return and feel safe and secure. When that place becomes a haven of discord, anxiety or even danger, there is no peace. No peace within the walls, no peace within the souls of those who reside there. Too many instances exist where this is the case. When deep discord exists, perhaps it is time to reflect on that question of how we are contributing toward or not contributing toward the creation of a peaceful home. That same question applies to our life together as a church community and in our places of work and recreation.

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There are gifted, dedicated people who specialize in helping families and organizations work through anxieties, discords, communication problems, and challenges of the soul. Let's celebrate the professions and people who promote peacefulness over discord. I speak of the social workers, the mental health professionals, mediators, the counselors of many stripes and persuasions, specialized teachers, clergy and chaplains from diverse backgrounds—all these and others whom you can name, who are devoted to helping people create peaceful modes of living and being. But as much as these professions can be held up as “helping professions,” as followers of Christ we are all called to be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall see God.”

Peacemakers are not passive. Peacemakers do not avoid conflict. Peacemakers see right into the eye of the storm and dare to enter the space where conflict exists. Please do not fall into the trap of thinking that peacemakers are weak or dull or namby-pamby. *Au contraire*. Just look at those who have brokered peace in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland, in South Africa, and other places across the globe and across history. Strength and courage are the watchwords of peacemaking, be it

in individuals or through institutions such as NATO which exist to promote peace and provide protection for member nations.

As we reflect upon the nature of peacefulness, I urge all of us to pray for those thousands of persons—families—doing everything they can to escape war and conflict. Stories abound about those displaced, seeking a new home, a place of refuge and safety. I urge us to pray for those who now have no home, no oasis of safety and peace. May God give them strength and courage to start each day anew. May God also grant wisdom and inspire compassion to countries challenged with ways to respond to refugees desperate to find food, lodging and personal safety. May we all see that each refugee is a person—a man, a woman, a child—children of God as are we.

Who do you say I am?

Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark lesson we read today, poses the question: “Who do people say I am?” He is asking the question of his disciples as they visit villages of Caesarea Philippi. This area is now part of the Golan Heights, a disputed territory, 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the base of Mount Hermon. It is the location of one of the largest springs feeding the famed Jordan River.

The Gospel writer Mark depicts the disciple Peter replying: “You are the Messiah.” Jesus does not dispute this affirmation of his identity, does he? He simply warns Peter and the others not to let the cat out of the bag...yet. Then he proceeds to project dire warnings of what has to occur. Peter dares to rebuke Jesus! Then Jesus lashes out: “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” Wow! How would you like to be Peter in that scenario? Not me!

After telling Peter, the leader of the band of disciples, that he did not know what he was talking about, Jesus lowers the boom on all of them with a proclamation which would send shivers down their spines:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

What do you think the disciples thought about this? Have you ever wondered? Did they have any idea what he was talking about? Probably not at this point. It is still early in the story. What we are hearing through Mark are some of the teachings of Jesus, some of which were complicated to hear.

Mark's simple, straightforward styled Gospel establishes the plank on which disciples of Jesus would have to walk. Any one not able to commit, to be "all in," using the parlance of today, would surely bid his *adieu*, or it seems to me. The other response would be to stay aboard, attentive to Jesus' teachings and have a willing heart to learn how to become a follower of Christ.

Those two choices are still there for you and for me. We get to choose: will we give ourselves over to God, giving our deepest self to God? Or will we find ourselves giving ourselves to worldly preoccupations and stress?

When we choose God and God's salvific ways, when we lose ourselves and turn ourselves over to God, we, ironically, not only find ourselves, but we find that "peace which passeth all understanding." Picking up our own crosses, following the healthy ways God offers for our lives, leads us to the path of peace. That is the Good News we hear today. May we rejoice in this and commit ourselves to being agents of peace, agents of compassion, agents of God's love in the world. AMEN.

The Reverend Eleanor Ellsworth, St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, La Jolla, CA