

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church. Houston, TX
12 September 2021

Mark 8: 27-38

A Sermon of Remembrance For All The Victims of September 11, 2001
At the Towers and Beyond

It has been 20 years since the dark cloud of ashes in the clear sunny sky briefly masked the horror beyond, but just only for a few seconds. After that initial cloud, we could see and hear the sounds and visions of human despair: sirens blasting in all directions; people running, covered in dirt and ashes; conflicting reports from television and radio reporters; and nationwide speculation about what exactly was happening. Fear ruled the day, chaos reigned supreme; and all were disoriented, confused and shocked with unbelief. We felt vulnerable, exposed, and defenseless. Inside Tower One there was little time for speculation, doubt, or unbelief. There were rumors that various floors were on fire and countless people were presumed dead.

Some people within Tower One turned their television sets on and watched a surreal view of the horror that was happening inside. Some picked up their phones and called home, telling loved ones that they were OK, that emergency personnel were taking care of things, and that the worse was almost over. But then, the second tower was hit, and our questions were answered, our speculations ended, and our disbelief and denial were given a mortal blow. Someone had awakened the sleeping giant, someone had pierced the heart of democracy, an invisible enemy had violated our sense of security and our belief that “nothing like this can ever happen here.” The existence of evil had been proven beyond reasonable doubt. Someone had shown us the monsters in our nation’s closets, monsters that had been waiting in silence for the right moment: Plotting their grand entrance, counting the hours and the days, awaiting with great excitement for the banquet of blood that would soon be served on American soil.

And then our attention turned to the plight of those still inside: stockbrokers, office workers, maintenance workers, innocent bystanders, day care workers, preschool children, window-washers and more... Both women and men, old and young, single and married, American-born and those born outside of this great nation. We saw them scream from the windows, we saw them wave their arms to get someone’s attention, we saw them jump to their deaths in despair, we saw the debris and the rubble, we saw the gruesome sight to which one of our most impressive landmarks had been reduced. In short, we saw evil, darkness, despair, unbelief, and out-of-control hatred.

But that’s not all we saw that morning! We saw men and women courageously risking their lives to rescue survivors: firefighters rushing into the buildings, while most everyone else was racing out; police officers protecting and defending our rights, even as

the towers came crashing down on top of them. We saw medical responders, chaplains, and many other volunteers selflessly sacrificing their lives for the chance to rescue just one more person. I wasn't here in Houston then, but I hear that locally, many saw the deployment of volunteers to NY city and beyond, the tired teachers and hospital personnel revising evacuation plans and conducting emergency drills, just in case something like this were to happen here. And many saw additional security at NASA and other landmarks, while the community turned to prayer and vigil for the victims, injured survivors, emergency personnel and their families.

Many hugged their children a bit tighter, and many acted with great generosity either by donating blood, or by sending checks to care for victims and their families. In the days and weeks after the attacks we saw air transportation halted, the activation of military reserves to ensure national security, especially at our borders, and we saw a national debate about what our level of response should be. Most of all we saw our anger. We became an angry nation, a grieving nation, a determined nation. A nation at war! We became a much different nation then and we all had that spark of suspicion in our eye. We saw the enemy everywhere at the same time. We became a nation of watchers, and we began to pay a bit more attention to our neighbors, because, after all, anyone could be a terrorist and any American town or city could be the next target.

Twenty years later, many have begun to forget. The images of the day have been taken off our televisions because experts believe they are too painful. Publishers of magazines have voluntarily kept their most gruesome pictures out of their publications, and annual memorial services have been poorly attended. We want to forget. We have covered our scars with make-up and pretended those scars are not still there. We even have an entire generation of children who were not alive then and who don't have the same emotional connection to the events of that day.

But we cannot forget! Christians are "Remembrance People." We are people in touch with our past. We celebrate what God has done for us throughout history. We gather every week and remember Christ's death on the cross for us, his lost sheep. Week after week we tell and re-tell each other the great stories of our salvation. We are "Memory-People". We must remember September 11, 2001, and the twenty years that have followed since that day. And we must pray in gratitude for the selfless actions of brothers and sisters who risked and even lost their lives that day and in the last 20 years, as many of those first responders have died and continue to die of cancer. We must remember the thousands who died at the towers and other places, and we must commit to doing all we can do to eradicate hatred and inhumanity from the earthly stage. We must remember the thousands of young soldiers, both men and women, who died in Iraq and Afghanistan defending our freedom.

We must remember the thousands of soldiers who are still trying to recover from wounds sustained while protecting us, soldiers like Lieutenant First Class, Juan David (John David) Roldan, my nephew, who at the age of 22 lost both legs as his Humvee

crossed over an improvised explosive device in Fallujah in 2005. We must not forget the 16 years he has spent on a wheelchair, changing forever our family by his courage and determination. And we must continue to pray for those soldiers like him who are still struggling with the aftereffects of the actions we took as a result of September 11, 2001.

Today, Jesus reminds his disciples of the cost of discipleship. He says, "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." As a Christian, we must be willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for our faith if necessary. In fact, many of the first responders and emergency personnel who died that day were fueled by deeply Christian values. Many of them believed in service above self and they had internalized the very center of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, which is love of God and love of others. And it was that commitment to service and that commitment to God and others that drove them deeper into those towers, as their whole world was collapsing around them. My nephews, nieces, and children have grown up with the idea that citizenship demands commitment and sacrifice. It demands engagement in the political process. It sometimes demands military service. It demands that we do our part for the sake of all to defeat the evil of polarization and hatred in our politics. It demands that we work for unity and protection of those who are marginalized, forgotten, and left behind.

Today, as we remember the sacrifice of so many over the last 20 years, we remember without a spirit of vengeance, but with a spirit of gratitude and compassion. Today, as we remember darkness, we commit ourselves to being light and refuge, hope and opportunity, freedom and protection for the whole world. We have been blessed by God so that we may become a blessing to the nations. We must work for peace, even when this becomes a very difficult task. Christianity demands love of others, and it demands that we live into a Gospel of compassion and mercy. This is hard, but there is a cost to being disciples of Jesus.

Let us pray: Lord of all peace and compassion, guard and guide our country that in our search for security we may be mindful of the rights of others, especially the innocent, the weak and the disenfranchised. Eradicate all hatred from the human heart that we may live in peace regardless of the color of our skin, our faith systems, and our political convictions. Give us a better world for our children and our children's children, and all the children of God. Comfort us today as we remember the great sacrifice many have had to make these last 20 years. Uphold those who work, watch, wait, weep and love for the sake of forgiveness, reconciliation, and world peace. Help us to be mindful and grateful to those who place their lives at risk daily to protect our freedom. Bless the people and leaders of this nation and all nations, so that warfare, terror, and inhumanity may become things of the past. We ask you all of this in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen!
(End with a moment of silence in memory of our fallen and wounded soldiers.)