

9.11.11 Coming together, remembering and looking to the Lord of life

Today, September 11, 2011, marks the 10th anniversary of the terror attacks on the United States. Our nation was forever changed by this tragedy. Nearly 3,000 people died. The victims included 246 on the four planes, 2,606 in New York City in the towers and on the ground, and 125 at the Pentagon. 2,000 children lost a parent that day. Similar to the Kennedy assassination, most people remember where they were when they first heard that a plane hit a tower in New York City. Life stopped for me a little when I heard that Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, PA – just a few miles outside of the camp I grew up at and where a lot of really good people lived. This whole situation seemed beyond belief.

As a nation, we were shocked and angry and sad. And we grieved together. I remember nightly vigils at my college and surrounding churches since nobody knew what else to do. We went to God. We held candles, trying to remember the light of Christ in the midst of great darkness. We gathered as people of faith (even people of different faiths) and we laid our fear and anger and disillusionment before God.

Fast forward ten years and that's what people all over our country are doing today. Today in New York City, the National 9/11 Memorial is being dedicated and will open for visitors tomorrow. Presiding Bishop of the ELCA Mark Hanson will be at Trinity Lutheran in New York City to speak.

In Washington DC, an entire weekend of events is planned centering on the 9/11 Memorial at the Pentagon with special services scheduled at Washington National Cathedral.

And in Shanksville, PA a new memorial will be unveiled honoring the 40 people who died in Flight 93. President Obama has plans to be at all three sites today.

We gather as a people and we remember. It's what we are doing together here in this place and it's what people all over our country are doing today. It's what people who have formed their life and identity in Christ do when we don't know what to do. We go to God.

Our gospel today focuses on forgiveness. How many times should we forgive? Seven times seventy, Jesus replies. In his parable, the slave begs the king to have patience with him and maybe they could work out a payment plan. The king is moved by pity and forgives the slave his entire debt. Jesus uses this parable to describe the kingdom of heaven and God's great grace toward a people who fall short. It's hopeful because we see ourselves as the slave who is forgiven, and pick up on Jesus' hard-to-miss teaching that because we have been forgiven, we also ought to forgive others. That makes sense.

Then something like September 11th happens. And we are greatly tested. I find it incredibly difficult to the point of impossible to forgive a group of extremists who take pride in the death of others whose ideology differs from their own. I find it hard to forgive people who intentionally want me and the people I love to live in fear. This is something we wrestle with as Christians. As a fallible human being, this type of straight forgiveness may be beyond me.

But at the same time, I can't ignore Christ's teaching and more so Christ's cross that was given to him by people who hated him...people who wanted him dead. As he was being crucified, he prayed to God, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."¹

If we find total forgiveness impossible, perhaps the power of Christ's cross can allow us to let go of the anger that keeps us from moving past this event. Sometime anger can bind us so tightly that we can't see past that anger to the life that Christ would have for us. Hence why forgiveness is so healing.

September 11th devastated our nation, but I haven't seen our nation come together more than after this tragedy. We gained a new respect for firefighters and police officers and EMTs and we stood in solidarity with one another. Christ was not only with the people who died tragically, but he remains with those who continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress. He remains with us who live on edge a little more since 9/11. As Paul puts it, "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."² There's no separating us from Christ, because Christ has made it so.

One of the most touching moments of hope during the search and rescue effort of the World Trade Center was when a firefighter named Frank found a 2-ton, 20-foot steel beam in the perfect proportion of a cross. Frank said, "I saw Calvary in the midst of all the wreckage, the disaster. It was a sign ... that God didn't desert us."³ This cross is on display at the National September 11th Memorial Museum.

When criticized that the World Trade Center was made in right angles anyways, so finding a cross shaped beam isn't really special, Frank replied, "When the dust and smoke diminished, that's what was left. It's not something that we created." Much like the mystery of Christ working through death, Frank points out, we can't control or create the cross of Christ. God shows up in the very heart of our tragedies to bring hope to events that aren't fair, to bring strength to our failing courage when we realize how delicate life is and to free us from the anger that keeps us bound.

¹ Luke 23:34

² Romans 14:8a-9

³ "World Trade Center Cross Moved to Permanent Location" www.abcnews.go.com By Shelly Long, Associated Press, July 23, 2011

As much as the fear and death of tragedy wants to leave us in despair, Christ the Lord of the living wants to free us for his mission in the world. So we gather as a people, we certainly remember, and then we are sent out to show others Christ.

I will leave you with a reflection from one of our fellow Lutherans who was on the front lines on September 11th. He is Bishop Roy Riley of the ELCA New Jersey Synod and his faith journey over the past 10 years has caused him to say this: "Remember this: all the days of our lives - the best days and the worst days - are lived in God's precious presence, because God chooses to be present and promises to be with us to the end of time.

A cross that was lifted up on a hill outside of Jerusalem makes a cross that emerges from the ruins of the World Trade Center Towers mean something to us. We know that we and all those who lost their lives on 9-11-01 mean something to God, something very precious. This Gospel holds us in common and bids us to hold one another in love and in mercy - the common good born out of a most uncommon, unfathomable grace."⁴ Amen.

⁴ NE MN Synod Email, "Thinking Ahead to September 11, 2011"