

Lost and Forgiveness

A sermon preached by the Very Rev. James A. Diamond at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, September 10, 2006.

Barbara and I were on a tour bus in Rome. It was mid-afternoon and the tour was ending. Just before the tour concluded we passed the American Embassy. The building was surrounded by a tight ring of U.S. Marines and they, in turn, stood inside a larger circle of carabinieri. We did not have to be told that something was wrong. Ten minutes later we turned on the television in our hotel room in time to see the second plane bank over Manhattan and crash into the south tower of the World Trade Center. It was as surreal then, as it is today an unforgettable site.

Every single one of us knows precisely where we were on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when we heard about the World Trade Center and then the Pentagon and then later about a field in Shanksfield, Pennsylvania. We know the same for Friday, November 22, 1963, the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Some of us also remember Sunday, December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. It is the clarity of universal recollection that helps define these as epic events. In the days that followed the first thing we spoke about with our family and our friends was where we were, how we found out, what we thought and felt in the moment. The conversations were almost a ritual through which we were trying to absorb events too large for us to comprehend all at once.

It is interesting that there are other larger-than-life events that have occurred in the past few decades. On July 21, 1969, Neal Armstrong walked on the moon. In November, 1989, work started on the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Nelson Mandell was elected President of South Africa in 1994 marking the end of apartheid. But we do not have a universal recollection of these times. What sets December 7th, November 22nd and September 11th apart, in the words of the *Economist Magazine*, is the sheer epic malevolence that caused these events. As the incidents in 1941 and 1963 did in their time, September 11, 2001, has changed us and that change is primarily measured in loss. We lost 2,973 people who died in the attacks. We lost many authentic heroes, women and men who faced certain death in their efforts to save others, and men and women who, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks, joined the military because they felt their country needed to be saved. Authentic heroes, every one.

We lost our national sense of confidence, striking back in anger *in* the wrong place and *at* the wrong enemy. We lost our personal sense of safety. We no longer travel on commercial airlines for the sheer joy of flying. We fly out of necessity and with forbearance.

We have lost the sympathy and the good will that attends the bereaved. The immediate response to the United States was one of sympathy and solidarity from countries such as Syria and many others across the world. There was an outpouring of feeling for us. The September 12th headline in the Paris Newspaper, *La Monde*, was “We are all Americans.”

We have also lost a sense of trust in one another. If I do not know you, if we are more dissimilar than we are the same, I am probably going to be suspicious of you, perhaps even afraid of you, and I want you out of my zone of safety. That is but a short step to a mindset that speaks to the warning we hear this morning in the Epistle of James. The author of James sounds like an Old Testament Prophet, all that outrage and all that forewarning. But James is holding Jesus' own commandment before us, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. To do otherwise is to commit sin and to be a transgressor. There is a whole sermon in the Epistle for this morning and I think we all understand how it applies to us here and to places everywhere but I am not going to go there this morning with you. That is a sermon for another day.

Coming to the fifth anniversary of the attacks of 9/11 there are two tasks that face every American: to live beyond our anger and our fear and to begin to walk the path of forgiveness.

On September 11th of last year, I presented a Cross of Nails to St. Paul's Chapel, the church that is adjacent to what was the World Trade Center. Tomorrow, thousands of people will make a pilgrimage to that church as they do every year. At 8:46 a.m., the time when the first plane struck the North Tower, a bell will begin tolling and it will toll 2,973 times. As the bell tolls throughout the day, and after a morning of worship services, the staff of St. Paul's will hold healing services in the afternoon. For the first several September 11th's those healing services were about the pain of loss and despair, sadness and grief overwhelming people on each anniversary as it came. Now, some of the prayers for healing are to heal the anger that people still have inside them. Sorrow inevitably leads us to recognize our need to be healed of our anger. When we can let go of anger, we also find that our fear dissolves.

I find it very difficult to let go of my anger for such a disregard for the value of life and for the perversion of faith behind the attacks - as if such carnage could be pleasing to God. Every time there is another release of the recordings of the World Trade Center victims with their pleas for help coming over the telephones in what would be the last minutes of their lives, I find myself going through the cycle of sadness and anger all over again. But I know, as you do, that our Christian faith teaches us that God did not make us for darkness and death but rather for light and for life, that God calls us to understanding and love, not to revenge and to hatred. I know, as you do, that Jesus asks us to forgive our enemies and those who wish us harm, The hardest challenge for every Christian is to love those neighbors whom we will never see and who bear us malevolence but forgiveness is the point to which Jesus always calls us.

A few years ago I had a wonderful lunch with a member of this congregation who is now deceased, an older member of the congregation. As we walked back to the Cathedral he said to me, you know, I don't like reconciliation, I don't believe in it, I don't practice it, I don't think it is right. I said, well, tell me more. He said: "I can't let go of my hatred of the Japanese. All these years later, it is still part of me. But after all these years that hatred has left a hole in me." And that is just the point that Jesus makes. If we retain the

sins of others, those sins are retained in us and they are corrosive within us to the core of our souls.

I have been discussing with the leadership of St. Paul's Chapel the issue of forgiveness for September 11th, 2001. They know far more deeply than I do just how much there is to forgive but they have willingly entered into this conversation with me because we know that as St. Paul's was the locus for triage, for food and rest, and later as hallowed ground on which people could put memorials so it must be the place from which begin a national conversation about forgiveness. But the conversation needs to begin with each one of us and it is a simple prayer: O God, give me just the desire to be forgiving. Let me start with desire.

Tomorrow night on September 11th two bright beams, huge columns of light, will shine side by side in the New York sky, twin towers in the evening's darkness. The night of last September 11th as I walked to the edge of ground zero, I realized that I was being guided by those two beams, silent memorials to so much of what has been lost. People seemed drawn from everywhere. They were coming from streets all around, streaming towards the source of those shimmering towers.

The light lifted up everyone's gaze. Lifting our eyes can be a sign of hope. Hope for a forgiving and a more peaceful future. Amen.

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