

Sept. 11, 2008

Romans 12:9-21

Psalm 118:5-9

Luke 6:27-38

Today we mark the seventh anniversary of the unthinkable. September 11, 2001, was a day in history when the earth tilted a little on its axis, and the unimaginable became real. More than two thousand seven hundred people were killed at the hands of religious extremists who themselves died with the name of the One God on their lips. The unreal, the surreal, became utterly real, and life in The United States of America changed.

How do we deal with this as Christians, as followers of the Prince of Peace? How do we make any sense at all of those events, and of the loss we will always feel at the remembrance of all those loved ones, known and unknown? At the loss of all the brave first responders who rushed headlong into the terror? How will we ever see a perfect clear blue September morning again without reliving the dreadful events that unfolded on that morning?

Whenever I am lost, whenever I am torn or confused, I seem to unfortunately turn first to my brain in an attempt to sort things out. You'd think I'd have learned by now to turn first to Jesus, but somehow my brain jumps to have first crack at solving difficult questions. And so my brain wonders, why is it that we humans have this terrible tendency towards violence and war, always with the aim of personal gain, and almost always in the name of God? What is up with that, and will we ever evolve past this? And how is it that God continues to be patient with us, even while we pervert all manner of Holy Scripture to support our aims? From the jihad of the Crusades to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, to the events of September 11 and the atrocities of Darfur, will we ever get to a place where we even half-deserve the forgiveness and grace freely given us high up on that cross, where even Our Lord was crucified in the name of religious and governmental authority?

Clearly, the One God is a patient God. Having tried to help us by giving us the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament, our God saw that we were not a very gifted bunch. Clearly we needed more than any detailed book of law could provide. So God tried love. Incarnate in the form of our Lord Jesus the Christ, love came down. To teach us, and in offering himself on the cross, to show us: how to love, and how to forgive.

Because of course, my brain only gets me so far in trying to understand evil in the world, and how I am to respond. And *then* I remember - finally - where do I turn when I'm really lost, when I'm out of clever ideas or brave defenses? I remember to turn to Jesus. What did he say, and what did he do? We actually have an operating manual, rules of engagement. In our Holy Scripture we heard our epistle lesson last week, and in choosing our lessons for this special day, I thought it would serve to hear Paul's words on this again. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. Paul refers to the book of Deuteronomy: "It is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" And in choosing our Gospel reading today, we hear Jesus of course go farther than any lesson on vengeance when he teaches

us: *“I say to you that listen; love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those that abuse you...do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.”*

We could say, “Oh, but that was in the innocent times of ancient history; he wasn’t referring to the unthinkable cruel violence of using a commercial airplane full of innocent passengers as a bomb to blow up the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Capital Building.” But let us turn to him, and remember that *he* was killed by the unthinkable cruel violence of being scourged and nailed alive to a cross, and left almost alone to suffocate to death. No, we humans have always had this awful capacity to inflict terribly creative acts of violence on each other. We are all born with the full spectrum of good and evil, and with the free will to choose which we will use. What *will we* choose? Where do *we* turn? We as faithful Christians, as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, *we turn to him*. We study and digest his words in scripture, and we ponder deeply in our hearts his final act of ultimate forgiveness from the cross. *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

We are all children of the One God, and we all have the capacity to fall far from grace and commit the unthinkable. Let us remember all the loved ones lost seven years ago, and the families still in grief. Let us remember, and learn, and evolve from grief and fear and loathing to the possibility of forgiveness, because *that is our charge*. If we mean what we say, that we are followers of The Way, we must accept that this is the direction we are to go. But we don’t have to try to get there on our own, with only our brains and our emotions to guide us: we have the grace of God, and the example of Jesus the Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to support us as we strain towards our evolution.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts
Associate Rector, St. John’s Episcopal Church
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