

Sermon Proper 19  
September 12, 2021  
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, pour strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As I begin the sermon this morning, let us acknowledge the tragic and terrible import of this weekend. Yesterday was the twentieth anniversary of what we have come to simply call "9/11". Twenty years ago yesterday, at 8:46am, the first plane struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. From that moment on, those of us who were not in NYC, or at the Pentagon, or on the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania watched our televisions in horror as the unimaginable became imaginable.

It was one of those moments that, like Pearl Harbor, or the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or the explosion of the Challenger spacecraft are indelibly etched in the memories of those of us who lived through them and for all the most painful of reasons. We can tell each other precisely where we were, and what we were doing, when we first heard the news as if it were yesterday. Time can be a gentle healer, but there are moments in all of our lives that will always be with us. We will never be free of them entirely.

Another powerful memory many of us have of the days and weeks that followed were the stories that were told of the incredible love, courage, and grace that so many who were at ground zero, or the Pentagon, or on the planes themselves, demonstrated that day in the face of that terror. They say that crises can turn average men and women into the greatest of heroes in an instant. That was demonstrated over and over and over again that day. Selfishness was overcome by the greatest of concern for the wellbeing of others, and not even death itself could defeat it. In retrospect, I don't think I have ever known our nation to be as unified as it was in the weeks afterwards. It wasn't about you or me. It was about us, as any democratic society should be. It was about genuine concern for all.

"We, the people..."

This is why Ground Zero is now, in a very real way, understood to be holy ground.

Now, here we are, twenty years later. And what have we learned? Well, it seems that we returned to our old patterns pretty quickly and now many would say that our country is as divided as it has ever been in living memory. Instead of love, grace, and courage, we seem to be ruled by fear, suspicion, anger, and hate, both within and without. We remember the names of the victims but we seem to forget the lessons they taught us that day. We honor their memories but have we really

learned from them, in any permanent way, the true meaning of love and sacrifice for the sake of others in this world that we share?

Lest we have missed it entirely, the theme of love as sacrifice runs like an electric current throughout all of the New Testament. Jesus continuously preaches that true faith is not about honor and prestige achieved by crossing the right theological "T"s and dotting the appropriate liturgical "I"s, as the scribes and Pharisees taught and practiced. Indeed, there was a popular prayer amongst the Pharisees in Jesus 'day that went something like this:

I thank you Lord, my God, that you have set my portion with those who sit in the sanctuary, and not with those who sit on street corners. I rise early and they rise early: I rise to attend to the word of the Torah, and they to attend to futile things. I exert myself and they exert themselves; I exert myself and receive a reward, and they exert themselves and receive no reward. I run and they run. I run to life in the world to come, and they run to the pit of destruction.

Talk about your "holier than thou".

Jesus, on the other hand, was constantly saying things like, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me

Or, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Or, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Because, in the end, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Not love expressed occasionally in the form of sacrifice. Jesus is saying that Love for God IS a constant state of sacrifice for the sake of others. As Jesus clearly states in this morning's passage from Mark, we are to live our lives as if we are constantly carrying the cross for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amongst my favorite parables in the four Gospels is the parable of the Good Samaritan, found in chapter 10 of Luke's Gospel. Not only is it a parable that greatly expands our understanding of who are neighbors truly are, it also reveals what lengths God calls to go to on their behalf. The priest in the story doesn't get it. Neither does the Levite. It is only the Samaritan who truly models the sacrifice. At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asks the attorney who first raised the question about "who is my neighbor", "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The attorney responds, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "GO and DO LIKEWISE."

Just as the Good Samaritan went out of his way (sacrifice) to care for the stranger lying half-dead by the side of the road, so God is ALWAYS taking the initiative to go to great lengths to seek and save the wounded, the downtrodden, and the lost. That's why he sent his son. And that is why his Son expects much the same from us. Because the salvation of every lost man and woman is a cause for divine celebration in the kingdom of God.

You see, those who claim to be a disciple of Jesus can never be satisfied that their numbers are sufficiently great, or that their efforts are enough, as to stop trying to save one more sister, one more brother, one more child of God. There will never be a time when we can say, "well, that's enough", and rest on our laurels. At least not on this side of death!

Sacrifice for the sake of our neighbors was, is, and always will be the mission of Church and the ministry of all the baptized. This is the work that Jesus has entrusted to our congregation. We are the Body of Christ at work in the world today and we are engaged, just like those emergency workers twenty years ago, in the work of search and recovery. Such work requires sacrifice and such sacrifice reveals to the world the love of our Savior.

On this twentieth anniversary of 9/11, what sacrifices are we prepared to make today for the sake of the Gospel, sacrifices that make the love of God so very real? Amen.