

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

"The Lost"

Where were you fifteen years ago today? You may have been doing a lot of reflecting on that, especially this morning. I am sure many of us remember things in your life that stand out; like when John F. Kennedy was shot and killed or just what we were doing when we heard about the first plane hitting the World Trade Center. I can remember a sense of absolute disbelief, thinking how is that possible? Maybe it was a small plane - you see Teterboro Airport is right across the Hudson River – not far in New Jersey. We all tried to find out as fast as we could, but the internet was nowhere like it is today; there was no live streaming of the news broadcasts – and we had to run to find a TV. I was at AT&T Universal Card in Jacksonville, Florida, and all of us in the Information Technology Department started getting live news fees on any available TV's throughout the campus. That became so much more important as the day progressed. (Asked the congregation to observe a moment of silence for those lives that were lost on 9/11/2001.)

I was talking to Holly yesterday and she said something that hit home to me; that being in Douglas, GA a lot of other people didn't realize how close to home it hit other people. Growing up on Long Island, even though I was living in Jacksonville- 2 hours south of here, I had friends who worked in the Trade Center, and a sister who worked just a block away, and I was very familiar with the area, having been in the buildings many times over the ten years that I worked in Manhattan. The 72nd floor was the AT&T Branch Office and Development Center for demonstrations and training. I had been there many times. I could also tell you names of Firefighters from my hometown of Merrick, NY who went into the buildings. Ronny Geis was one who died that day, trying to save lives. Even though being 1,000 miles away I could really visualize the places that were being reported over the news reports. Things then took off at a frantic pace. I was on the phone with my sister, Lee, Kathleen Hlavacek, who worked very near the Trade Center – and the phone went dead. At that moment the first building collapsed and came tumbling down, causing communications to be cut off. I would not find out until much later in that day that she, along with thousands of others in the chalky air - walked miles across the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn, on Long Island, simply to take the Long Island Rail Road home. It took her hours!

There are many accounts of what transpired next – but many questions were asked as well – like “where was God during this?” “How could Jesus let all of those people die such horrible deaths?” Parents, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, mothers and fathers, friends and loved ones were lost. Many people asked where Jesus was during these attacks. And they were attacks – by people filled with hate and driven by evil. The answer is clearly given to us when we go to God's Word. Let's begin with the words of Jesus Himself: “*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20) Jesus never left the side of those men and women who were trapped in the buildings, and the first responders. Those who love Jesus have His Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them - and for those who did not know Jesus - God had this to say through the Psalmist: “*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,*

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 11, 2016, Year C

and you will honor me." (Psalm 50:15) The Lord told Moses to encourage His people for ages to come: *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Deuteronomy 31:6) The Apostle Paul puts this all into perspective: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28)

If that is not enough – let's look at the character of our compassionate Almighty God as Jesus told us in the Parables in Luke 15. There is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents. Jesus was not saying the other 99 sheep were not important. Instead, He was emphasizing that the one sheep not in the fold corresponded with the sinners with whom Jesus was eating. The 99 righteous persons refer to the Pharisees who *thought* themselves righteous and therefore in no need to repent. God does not want to lose *any soul* – He is filled with compassion and loves each and every person. God loves humanity so much that He will not force His love on anyone. That, my friends, is Free Will – and His invitation is for everyone. We just need to stop and think of Jesus' words in John 3:16-18 *"For God so loved the world"* –not just Christians; not just Jews; He loves everyone so much *"that He sent His only Son – that whoever believes in Him shall not perish – but have eternal life."* That gift comes to all who believe! Because of free will – the enemy uses it by manipulating those who refuse the invitation of Salvation – and evil can creep in, or onto a plane and do what they did fifteen years ago today. It should be our prayer that those 'lost sheep' would see Jesus welcoming them and not refuse His loving care. We need pray for them! We need to pray for people who refuse Christ! Did you know that Muslims are seeing Jesus in dreams? They are receiving Him in vast numbers. We don't hear that on the news – because that doesn't sell – and it doesn't fit the agenda of certain people in power. We need to pray for those lost souls!

The Parable of the Lost Coin teaches us that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels when a sinner repents. This is the same message as the first parable but it emphasizes the thoroughness of the search. The woman continued to sweep the house and search carefully until she found the coin which was something very valuable. A *drachma*, a Greek silver coin it was so valuable a person would want to search very carefully. Houses in that time usually had no windows and only dirt floors, making the search for a single coin difficult, if not nearly impossible. The point would have been clear to Jesus' listeners: the sinners with whom He was associating were extremely valuable to God. Every sinner is valuable to God – His creation. God loves all of His creation!

The last 15 years have resulted in a lot of healing – and also a lot of pain. My family and I lost many dear friends, and the community where I grew up in Merrick, New York, has lost many police and fire fighters. One particular guy, Tommy Crotty, died in the World Trade Center. He grew up, moved to Rockville Center, on Long Island, and had a wife and children, and one day he never came home after going to work. The wounds are very near and dear to our hearts. We must never forget what took place that day – the first time that an attack like this took place on

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 11, 2016, Year C
our homeland, and How Jesus' compassion and love not only covered those who died – but covered those who lost loved ones that day.

A further example of God's love is in the verses immediately following today's Holy Gospel – I am sure you are familiar with the Prodigal Son. This young man made the worst insult to his father – and demands his inheritance while his father is still alive! His father loves him so much that he gives it to him. This young man completely squanders it – and ends up eating with the pigs. You can tell it is not a Jewish neighborhood where he has sunken SO low – he is in a land that raises pigs – unclean animals to the Jews, and he longs to return home – not as a son, but a servant. His father was caring for his other son, and this son decides to return home. This father did the unexpected. A lot of times fathers came sit back and expect their sons to come to them, waiting for him to come and apologize. That is not the character of THIS father; that is not the character of Almighty God – our Father. Well, this father sees him coming and doesn't wait for him to come and apologize – but instead he RUNS to him. That is the character of God – He pursues the lost and not sitting on high waiting for them to come and apologize. God is filled with mercy – NOT giving us what we deserve. We pray for mercy – but instead He gives us His Grace, an undeserved gift – and makes us heirs in His Kingdom.

As we remember September 11, 2001 today – let us not forget to pray for those who lost loved ones – and pray for those lost souls whose lives are empty because they don't know Jesus.