

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 11, 2022, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

“Let Us Not Forget”

This past Thursday, September 8th, a group of us gathered in the Belk Parking lot to remember the events of 21 years ago today in New York City, Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon in Washington, DC. I must ask you - where were you twenty-one years ago today? We were chatting just before we prayed in the sacristy this morning, and one of our worship team was not even born yet. How many people here today were born before 2001? It is not a bad thing if you weren't but it just means that memory is not engrained in you. You may be doing a lot of reflecting on that, for example on the History Channel they are showing all of these different documentaries showing and remembering what took place that day and what built around it. especially this morning. 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? I thought that maybe it was a small plane from nearby Teterboro Airport, which is right across the Hudson River, New Jersey. Everyone tried to find out as fast as we could, but the internet was nothing like it is today; there was no live streaming of the news broadcasts. There was no such thing as Google – it wasn't around yet. There were other search engines so you would go out and “Ask Jeeves” or whatever it was that you were using. I see some people are remembering that. You would try to find out what was going on. It was very slow in coming in. We had to scamper 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.

(Right now - I ask you to you please observe a moment of silence with me for those lives that were lost on September 11, 2001.) Let us not forget.

Growing up on Long Island, New York, even though I was living in Jacksonville Fl., I knew that I had friends who worked in the Trade Center, and a sister who worked just a block away. 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 of building one (North Tower) was the AT&T Branch Office and Development Center for demonstrations and training. I had been there many times. I can also tell you names of Firefighters from my hometown of Merrick, NY who, being New York City Firefighters, went into the buildings. Ronny Gies 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. I had walked those streets many times. It was truly a frantic day. I was on the phone with my sister, Lee, Kathleen Hlavacek, who worked very near the Trade Center, on Wall Street, at Sadlier Publishing, and suddenly, the phone went dead. At that moment the first building collapsed, 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 several miles across the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn, on Long Island, to take the Long Island Railroad home. It took her hours to get there and to get home! I finally got to speak with her later in the evening and found out that she was safe.

There are many accounts of what transpired next, but people asked many questions as well, like “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 who were 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 behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20 ESV) Jesus never left the side of those men and women who were trapped in the buildings, and the first responders as well. Those who love Jesus have His Holy Spirit to comfort and to guide them, and for those who did not know Jesus, God said through the Psalmist: “*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, 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 all of this 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)

And then there is the character of our most compassionate Almighty God, as Jesus told us in the Parables in Luke 15. The rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents. Jesus was not saying that the other 99 sheep were not important. Instead, Jesus 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 even one soul – He is filled with compassion and He 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. All we need to do is 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 believe me, evil can creep in, or onto a plane and do what they did twenty-one 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 today? They are receiving Him in amazing numbers. You 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 as well! Please, let us not forget. I am not being political in any way shape or form, and you may be saying – Fr. you are talking about those in power. I am not talking about government. News agencies have people in power – and they have agendas. Trust me – they have agendas. I worked in broadcasting and as a matter of fact I still work in broadcasting, but I work amongst Christians now. I have got to tell you that at one point we were told that we were not allowed to say “Merry Christmas” on the radio. It had to be “Happy Holidays!” Those in power have an agenda.

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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 that 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 for it. Houses in that time usually had no windows and only dirt floors, making the search for a single coin pretty 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. As a matter of fact, every sinner is valuable to God - His creation. God loves all of His creation!

The last 21 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 that day. One particular man, Tommy Crotty, died in the World Trade Center working in the financial industry. We grew up together, and I even coached him in baseball. He grew up, moved to Rockville Center, on Long Island, and had a wife and 2 beautiful daughters. That day he never came home after going to work. Another person was Captain Ronnie Gies of the Merrick Volunteer Fire Department who also worked in the New York City Fire Department. He went willingly into the site of the terrorism that day, trying to save people and put out the fires. He also did not come home that day to his wife, Carol, and their three sons. Others were David Greiner, Sean, and Farrell Lynch, two brothers, and Brian Sweeney. There were 15 people who went to my church that never came home that day. My godson and nephew, Patrick Gavigan, was a NYC Police Officer who got called to the Ground Zero for rescue and recovery, because he also was a Merrick Volunteer Fire Fighter, experienced in saving lives as well as rescue. During his time working at Ground Zero, he was taken for smoke inhalation to the Chelsea Piers makeshift hospital, and is not only a survivor, but he helped to recover many victims for their families. Patrick was honored for his efforts and bravery by Mayor Rudi Giuliani, who asked Patrick what the city could do for him, since he had done so much for them. Patrick said that it was his dream, that he always wanted to be a New York City Fireman, and joined the Police Department in hopes of one day transferring to the Fire Department. The mayor saw to it that Patrick was in the next Fire Department training class, and Patrick just celebrated his 20th anniversary as a Lieutenant in the N.Y.C. Fire Department.

The wounds are so very near and dear to all of our hearts. All of us have stories, all of us have connections, whether close personal connections or memories. We must never forget what took place that day, the first time that an attack like this took place on our own homeland, and how Jesus' compassion and love not only covered those who died, but covered those who lost loved ones that day, and those who worked tirelessly to search for survivors as well as victims of this tragedy. Let us never forget.

I want to suggest to you God's love is in the verses immediately following today's Holy Gospel – I am sure you are familiar with the parable of the Prodigal Son. This young man made the worst insult to his father, demanding his inheritance while his father is still alive! His father

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loves him so much that he gives it to him. This young man completely blows it, he squanders it – and ends up eating with the pigs. Pigs were trayf, they were unclean. You can tell it is not a Jewish neighborhood where he has sunken SO very 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 to work for his father. 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 his son. That is the character of God – He pursues the lost and is 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.

Today, in closing, as we remember September 11, 2001, I would ask each of us to not forget to pray for those who lost loved ones and pray for those people whose lives are empty because they don't know Jesus. Let us remember to pray for those left behind and always remember all those whose gave everything that day. Let Us Not Forget!