

9/11 and a Parable of Grace

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Today provides an unusual challenge for me as the preacher. We have the first two of a three part series of parables of Grace that Jesus told in reaction to the Pharisees and Scribes being angry that he was eating the tax collectors and sinners. This is also Sunday September 11 2016, exactly 15 years after some very warped and damaged terrorists committed an act of incredible and to most of us unthinkable violence and changed our world forever. How in the world do these two inform each other? Stay with me as I try to make some sense out of this and try to offer if not an answer at least something to ponder and pray over.

First of all it is important to know that these are the first of three parables and I really wish the third was included for the third in this set, the climax of Jesus' point is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. These answer the Pharisees criticism of caring for the "other." What was lost even though it may not have known it was lost has been found and we have a stunning example of how Grace works in the kingdom.

9/11 is one of those events where all of us here that were alive can probably remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when the first plane hit the Twin Towers. I was in my first full week of classes at Virginia Theological Seminary and James our youngest was a newly enrolled sophomore at TC Williams High School in Alexandria. We were about 10 minutes on a good day from the Pentagon. I heard the plane hit the Pentagon and felt the administration building where I was shake and the windows rattle. I went outside and saw the smoke rising on the horizon

The dean sent me to gather the students from a couple of the dorms in the chapel for prayer and we prayed among other things the Great Litany that we say on the first Sunday of Lent. When we came to the line about dying suddenly and unprepared there was a pause and silence. Silence except for the F-16 probably from Langley that shrieked overhead thinking another plane was inbound. Silence except for helicopters and ambulances headed to Alexandria Inova hospital, the closest to the Pentagon. Our first thought was we wanted to do something anything. The second and third year students all headed off later in the afternoon to go to the parishes where they were doing their field work. To somehow comfort the families who had lost loved ones and most of the parishes did loose people.

I was watching a PBS program Tuesday night about the plane hitting the Pentagon. One of the things that was mentioned that the rescue staff had a problem with many of the Navy personnel. They couldn't get them out of the

building and keep them out because they all had the “we don’t leave a shipmate behind” mindset. And that brought to mind the fact that the parables are both about something that is lost, but the focus is on the person doing the searching.

The shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to go after the 1 is not really what most shepherds in that day would have done. Maybe send a dog after it, but they would stay with the 99 to keep them safe. Shepherds also rarely owned the sheep and were often slaves and going into the wilderness to look for someone else’s sheep was dangerous. Better to lose one than get yourself or other sheep killed.

In these parables the person doing the searching is in fact a metaphor for God and these are stories of God’s Grace and how God is always searching for us with the same determination that was shown by those sailors and the fire fighters at the Pentagon and of course the police and fire fighters in New York City.

There was and remains a tremendous and understandable anger over this attack and we have lived with the results for the past 15 years and our community in particular has seen deployment after deployment in the battle against terror. Yet we also face the particularly difficult message from Jesus who says to love not just our neighbors but our enemies. You see one of the great dilemmas is that Christianity is not an easy religion to follow.

I found two prayers that I have included in the Prayers of the People this week that relate to 9/11 and I want to take a moment to look at them right now before we say them. The first is written by Fr. James Martin, a Jesuit and writer for the Jesuit magazine America and their website. I have referenced him many times in sermons.

You will find the prayer on page 3 of the bulletin:

A Christian Prayer: I Loving God, You know that I believe in you. You know that I trust in you. You know that I love you. But sometimes life is so painful, your ways impossible to understand, and your world so confusing. Sometimes I am overwhelmed with pain. Sometimes I feel tempted to despair. Sometimes I give way to hatred. Sometimes I doubt even you. In times of pain, give me comfort. In times of despair, give me hope. In times of hatred, give me love. In times of doubt, give me trust. And even when I feel far from you, be close to me, Loving God.¹ (Fr. James Martin)

There is much to consider in this prayer but it does sum up at least my feelings as I contemplate this day. It is easy to despair and even easier to hate those who have hurt us. There are definite echoes of the Prayer of St. Francis in this.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/09/prayer-for-911_n_955705.html

² Rev. Dr. Francis Wade, Rector St. Alban’s Episcopal Church Washington DC

The second prayer was one that was written by the Rector of St. Alban's, which is located right next to the national cathedral. This prayer was read in many churches on the Sunday following the attack and it still speaks to me in a powerful way. Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies and this may be one of the most profound examples of how to do that.

Let us pray for those who do great harm: *Almighty God, whose will it is to place awesome power into the hearts, minds and hands of your children, let your care and our compassion be on those who do harm as well as those who are harmed. Lord, you reached across the limits of human understanding to embrace the outcast and the lost, reach now beyond our understanding and embrace those who have caused so much pain and death this day. We cannot but commend them to you for in our hearts are seeds of hatred and in our nostrils the stench of madness. As you touch them in your healing ways, Lord God, dry also the hate that could grow in us, smother the fear that would blind us and deliver us from the temptation to follow instincts that are far from the path you have set before us. In the Name of the One we always hope to follow, Jesus Christ, our Lord Amen.*²

Why is it important to pray for our enemies when it is so easy to hate and revile them especially people who commit such atrocities. The answer is found in the question, because it is so easy to hate them. Forgiving your enemies is not about your enemies but about your own soul. Hate is a cancer that eats into your soul. Look at what hate is causing right now in the world. Jesus got angry with people but always loved them and that's hard. Loving your enemies is about making sure your soul is healthy and in line with the teachings of Jesus. Loving your enemy as the pray says is about making sure you do not go down the same destructive path that they do. He writes, "*deliver us from the temptation to follow instincts that are far from the path you have set before us.*" That is the key line in this entire prayer.

Jesus sets a very high standard for how we treat our fellow human beings and this is so hard when they treat us with such hatred and violence. For if we react and truly return hate for hate, then we have given control of ourselves over to our enemy and run the risk of doing things that are incredibly damaging to our souls.

At the risk of trivializing this, it really does come down almost to the Star Wars choice of not surrendering to the dark side. The dark side is always easier to surrender to and to our base selves the more inviting, but we are called to choose the light.

This is a call to turn away from darkness and turn to the light that shines on us from Jesus. As for me I will choose the light even though that is the more challenging.

² Rev. Dr. Francis Wade, Rector St. Alban's Episcopal Church Washington DC