

September 12, 2021

“9/11 Twenty Years Later”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 13:1-5; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Let me begin today by reading some excerpts from the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. “When God created the heavens and earth, God's Spirit swept across the darkness and God said, ‘Let there be light, let there be water and sky, let there be dry land and vegetation and living creatures of all kinds.’ And then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, make them reflect our nature.’” Yes, when God created human beings, he created them in his image, reflecting God's nature of love and goodness. And God blessed them, giving them free will and free reign over all the earth. And when God looked over everything he had created, he said it was good, so very good. However, shortly after God created all those good things, humankind used that gift of free will, free reign – free choice, for purposes other than good. And on that day sin and evil and misfortune entered the world.

Yesterday, I think many people across the nation took time to remember and reflect on the tragedy of 9/11. Think back on that September day. The sight of airliners packed with passengers, traveling at hundreds of miles an hour, crashing into buildings. Those twin towers standing thousands of feet high, billowing in flames and smoke. The subsequent collapse of those buildings and all of lower Manhattan becoming a literal battle zone. The sight of tens of thousands of New Yorkers walking home across the length of the city because there was no mass transportation. In a city where the noise could overpower you, they streamed in stunned silence across the bridges which were their only ways out of the horror. It's as if we were an audience watching an action film on a big screen in a movie theater. And on top of all that, two additional planes, filled with people, went down that day. One crashing into the Pentagon and one brought down by the heroics of the passengers. And even though it's been twenty years, the magnitude of the tragedy still overwhelms our senses and doesn't seem quite real.

Yes, I'm sure all of us look back and consider it to be one of the worst events we have ever experienced. Because life as we knew it changed on that day. First, we had to come to grips with the hard truth that there was a terrorist attack on U.S. soil that killed thousands of people. And we know terrorists are still out there looking to wreak more havoc in this country and elsewhere. But there's more. The way and ease in which we Americans travel has changed. Our individual freedoms have been affected and diminished. Wars have been fought and thousands of soldiers have died. Yes, on a broad scale, 9/11

changed many things. And those underlying questions we asked back then, “Why did God let this happen?” and “How could there be such evil in the world?” and “What will the future bring?” still ruminate in our minds even today.

So let's look at today's Scriptures to try to understand about the evil and misfortune that exist in the world. First, a group of people are having a conversation with Jesus about some recent tragedies. They, too, are effectively asking him the same questions we ask. “Why did God let this happen?” “How could there be such evil in the world?” “Yes, Jesus, tell us why God let the Roman occupation army massacre innocent men, women and children, and why did God allow eighteen people to be killed when a tower crashed in on them?” And when questioned, the normally compassionate and sensitive Jesus answers in a rather abrupt manner, “I tell you, unless you repent, you too will all perish just as they did.” If I might take some liberties and paraphrase Jesus, he’s saying, “Yes, it’s a fact of life that bad things are going to happen in this fallen world. It all started shortly after God created all those good things and humankind used that gift of free choice for purposes other than good. And so, given that fact, the most important thing for you to do in this life is to get right with God.” You see, Jesus doesn’t answer those “why” questions. Instead, he turns their attention from trying to blame God, and redirects their attention to themselves and their relationship with God. And that’s frustrating, isn’t it? For as Bishop Will Willimon says, “We really don't want God, we want answers. And God’s answers had better be good or we’ll look elsewhere and find a God who demands a lot less than repentance.” But the real truth of the matter is that there is no where else to turn. Life is short, life is fragile, and we are all going to perish in one way or another, and so perhaps we had better get right with God.

Now let’s look at the second Scripture lesson. Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. And in the story, the landowner, God, sowed only good seeds in his wheat field. Only very good seeds. But while everybody is asleep an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat and then goes away. As the seeds grow, the workers, you and I, find a mixture of wheat and weeds. And we ask, “Where did these weeds, this evil, come from?” The landowner’s answer is matter-of-fact and to the point. “An enemy has done this!” He goes on to explain the hazard that in pulling out the weeds now, the wheat will also be pulled out and destroyed as well. And so he allows the wheat and the weeds, the good and the evil, to co-exist. Here again Jesus does not bother to address the questions that trouble us. He does not try to placate our fears about evil. Evil exists, and even God’s Son, Jesus accepts it as a fact of this life. But, at the end, he assures us, he promises us, that someday everything will be set right!¹

¹ The Will of God in an Unwilling World, J. Ellsworth Kalas

And so we see how relevant this parable of good and evil is for us today. As Pastor Eugene Peterson says, “There is a spiritual war in progress. There is evil and cruelty, unhappiness and illness. There is superstition and ignorance, brutality and pain. But God is in continuous and energetic battle against all of this. Because God is for life and against death. God is for love and against hate. God is for hope and against despair. God is for heaven and against hell. There is no neutral ground in this world. Every square foot of space is contested.” And what happened on 9/11? While our guard was down, while we were asleep, an enemy came and caused great harm.

But then, look what happened when that evil was contested by good. Look at how we responded to this tragedy. First, we all went back to church. We turned to God. It was in that time of death that we sought God – the author of life and of all things good. We realized our helplessness, our dependence on God, and we trusted in God’s strength and help and comfort. For some of us this may have been the first time in a long time that we were humble before God. We became a people that prayed, worshipped, gave and received love. We came together and there were no distinctions – no black or white, no rich or poor, no heterosexual or homosexual, no upper class or lower class. It was, shall we say, ‘very good.’ We were all God’s children, working together, crying together, praying together, loving together. We all came into the presence of the Lord as one, to get right with God, and we repented.

What else did we do? For a time we rejected the shallow and banal trappings that so strongly influence much of our days and time. Sporting events were canceled, because all of a sudden the sacredness of life was more important than watching grown men playing children’s games. Advertising on the major networks was suspended because all of a sudden we were more concerned about our fellow human beings than about our own desire to look better or obtain more toys. We didn’t want to hear about which brokerage firm really cares about our financial future. We were suddenly more concerned about our spiritual future. As a society we redefined the term, “hero”. It wasn’t the movie stars, sport stars, politicians, or TV personalities we fantasize about and put on pedestals. Instead we honored firefighters, police officers, doctors and rescue personnel, who risked and sacrificed their lives for total strangers. We cared more about what was happening in the lives of ordinary men and women. Those who were on the front lines of Ground Zero. We found a new depth of giving – of our money, our blood, our prayers, our compassion. We acted spontaneously, out of love, rather than stopping to calculate the cost. And we redefined the term “success.” Success was no longer measured by the amount of money one had or the number of possessions. It was not a job title or the size of one’s home

or the name brand clothes in the closet or the convenient lifestyle. Instead success became a person saved, a person found, a person healed, both physically and spiritually. All of a sudden success was measured in terms of bravery, self-sacrifice, charity, community, perseverance, kindness, and love for one another. For a short period of time we changed our attitudes and behaviors by rising above the trappings of this world. Yes, we decided to get right with God and we repented. And it felt “good,” didn’t it? Yes, Jesus was right all along.

So let’s revisit our questions. First, why did God let this happen? God didn’t, we did! Through humankind’s misuse of the gift of free will and free choice. Whether it is terrorists flying into a building or a drunk driver hitting a child or an ugly divorce that destroys a family, our choices do matter. And we must live with the consequences of those bad choices and decisions. God is blameless. Second, why is there evil in the world? Well, whether you want to believe it or not, there is a battle going on – good and evil vying for our souls. An enemy out there wants to cause us harm. It could be the devil, or in most cases it’s our own attitudes, our own words, our own actions, our own inactions. And so to really answer that question, we must look in our own hearts and determine whether we are aiding and abetting the enemy. And finally, what will the future bring? For us and our children and our grandchildren. Will it be good or bad? Well, ultimately, that’s up to us. The tragedy of 9/11 has taught us that nothing is certain, that life is fragile and that we are not in control. And so we can either choose to live in fear and worry or we choose to turn our lives over to the One who can help us overcome the suffering, the misfortunes, and the tragedies in this life – Almighty God.

Do you remember one of the most poignant images from 9/11? The photo of the World Trade Center Cross. Yes, there in the midst of all the rubble of that horrible tragedy, there appeared two steel beams fused together in shape of a cross. A cross! The symbol that God does overcome evil. Because look at what happened at the cross, the place of Jesus Christ’s great sacrifice, where even God’s Son suffered tragedy and death. At that place, what was once the ultimate symbol of evil was transformed into a symbol of tremendous hope. For what humanity meant to be a symbol of punishment, God caused to be a symbol of forgiveness. What humanity meant for evil, God caused for good. What humanity meant to be death, God caused to be life eternal. Yes, God took the worst deed in human history and turned it into the greatest victory the world has ever known to prove that He can and will make things right. That He does overcome the evil and the pain in the world, and that we need not fear. And so let us not question, rather let us seek to be right with God, to trust in his sovereignty, and to do our part to bring peace and love into this world. Amen.