

An event, occurring within this past hour, fifteen years ago this morning, unfolded that forever etched into the minds of this world's populace a visceral reality that our world would never be the same. As reports of hijackings and crashes, images of carnage and destruction as well as courage and heroics began to flood our senses, we joined all those of previous generations who could say, "I remember exactly where....."

Amidst the surrealness, the fears, the anger, a slogan, not original to our time but an inherent quality instilled in humanity by God himself, emerged. **"NEVER FORGET"**. A plea, birthed by our desire to make sense of the unexplainable, by an awareness that the ever-present, first in our minds and on our lips question of "why", could never satisfactorily be given or understood and by an insatiable need to not let tragedy be in vain. Within the briefest of time, signs and placards with this saying began appearing, not just at what would forever be known as "ground zero" but in the farm lands of mid-America and cities and towns big and small, in communities labeled as urban and rural, from coast to Gulf to coast, within our borders and across the world, in slums and ghettos and on pent houses and gated communities. On churches, on mosques and on temples. Penned and written and displayed by Christians, Jews, Muslims and those who worshipped no god at all. The events, and aftermath of 9/11, were not limited to the "dividing walls" that humanity creates and hides behind. This was not a single nation's problem, although it occurred on its soil, this was an attack on the collective "us".

And that saying did not fall up on deaf ears. Communities pulled together. Volunteerism was at an all-time high. Church attendance increased. Men and women stood and dug and gave and worked and cried and lifted up prayers together as buildings fell. And for a while it made a difference. Tasks were accomplished, money was raised, the balance of emotional recollection and essential revival emerged, and “unity” was achieved. The slow healing of a gaping wound began.

As the scar began to form, unfortunately, the signs and placards began to fade; first those visible to our physical eyes, and then, even sadder to the eyes of our hearts. We need to look no farther than our own community, our own churches, and our own lives for this stark reality to be apparent and proven true. Some even claim that the “unholy spirit” of our world is even darker now than before this catastrophe and sadly that the pendulum of “community” has swung all the way past civility to apathy, a trait far worse than hatred.

And so, my self-imposed task this morning is to resurrect that plea and to remind us to never forget. There are things, buried deep under mounds of distance, time and forgetfulness, that I want us to uncover; and not because they beautifully occurred in the shadow of this attack, but because each is imprinted and taught in God’s word and therefore within each of these is a lesson for us. I am aware that the very act of remembrance reveals our failure to do so; the volume of our forgetfulness is exposed.

To begin, let us never forget that we live in a fallen and imperfect world. In light of my opening thoughts last week, I understand that it would be appropriate for you to address me as Captain Obvious. The sheer reality of this condition is blatantly apparent with the slightest of effort.

It is, however, not the mere acknowledgment of this truth, but what difference that this truth solicits that is beneficial.

First we must understand that the current condition of our existence, with all of its ills and evils, is not the world that God originally created or how it was intended to function. The current state of affairs is not by God's design or God's will, they exist because our first ancestors, and everyone in between, has listened to the voice of the Father of Lies. A discourse concerning the role of God's permissive will is fodder for an important discussion and maybe even a future conversation, but it does not negate the source of the corruption or remove the blame it produces. Guilt lies at but one set of feet.

The awareness of this condition must impact us in a multitude of ways.

First, a realization of imperfection, should lead us to an appropriate, Godly acceptance and tolerance. I am aware that both of these words are pregnant with disgust and fear and both have been used to bludgeon dissenting ideologies. There is, however, no such thing as a perfect church, a perfect home, a perfect spouse or a perfect nation. There is no political party or system, no gender, no race or socio-economic caste that is

without fault, blemish or sin. “For all have sinned and fallen short...” And to live with that expectation is painful and painfully wrong. I am not suggesting that a pass or a “get out of judgment free” card be given for sin, that just because errors are universal; that they must be ignored or universally accepted and that the use of God-given wisdom and discernment is the same as being judgmental. A sin greatly condemned. But what I believe to be true, is that the fixation on blemishes makes it difficult to see community, makes it hard to see mutual culpability and shared blame and facilitates division, animosity and the continual reopening of this wound. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul states in chapter one the importance of praying for discernment but closes in chapter four with the admonition to make the choice to look for, remember, and to focus on the positive things in life and others, even the imperfect one. This will change our disposition, demeanor and dialogue.

Secondly, the evidence of our present “fallenness”, should increase our anticipation of our future existence. It would be wrong and inexcusable for me to play the ostrich and encourage us to ignore the pain, sorrow, grief and hurt that impacts each life and mars God’s design. God himself refused to be Pollyanna and was moved to action by the pain experienced by His creatures, Universal as well as Unique. Paul reminds us that the perfect became like the imperfect so that one day the corruptible could be clothed with incorruption. The human holy one touched the wounds, felt the pain, shed his tears and was moved to “House cleaning” because of the same

injustices, divisions propagated by man-made prejudices, and the actions prompted by dark, hard hearts that are manifested and memorialized even today. His response must become our mantra and we must be consumed with keeping the balance between heavenly consciousness and earthly goodness.

But just because we live here, does not mean that this is our home, no we are just passing through. This means that we have that all elusive word...hope. This recognition will change the way we react and will or at least should impact the news we share. In our attempt to make a difference within the circle of influence that God places us by being salt and light, we have a message.

Yes this world stinks sometimes, in every imaginable use of that word. We were shaken to that reality then and must remember that truth now.

But we must also remember that out of the fires of tragedy arose the phoenix of unity. There has been much discussion in the ensuing years as to whether unity is a misnomer for what we truly experienced. Maybe what developed wasn't really unity at all, but a temporary laying aside of differences, but whatever label or name you give it, as fractured and short-lived as it was, it was a beautiful thing because its uniqueness is so seldom seen or experienced. There were those groups and individuals that used this to further solidify their dogmas and anger, "the actions of some justified the repulsion of the whole." But those actions, both hateful and wrong, stands in stark contrast to the

masses that stepped out from behind or over the lines drawn based upon race, creed, color, gender, language, orientation or ideology. Groups separated by the multitude of perceived and conceived differences, worked together, cried together and rebuilt together. What made this possible was the appearance of a common enemy that redirected the focus from our differences to our commonality. Please allow me to stress a truth so often difficult to retain. The perpetrators had faces, names, flesh and blood, beliefs, agendas and evil intentions. The pain and devastation they unleashed cannot be ignored or minimized. God himself ordained civil government and a justice system to punish wrong doers. That Tuesday morning, God was as equally hurt and angry as we were, but our shared experience with Him must also support our shared response.

We have acknowledged several times the impact of Paul's instruction in the Ephesian letter, that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against....spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." There is much about this we do not understand specifically, but the essence is unavoidable. Our true, common enemy does not have faces, names, flesh and blood... As much as we want to label everyone from the hijacker of United 93 to the neighbor who continually allows his dog to knock over our trash cans, to that sister at church who, you fill in the blank....as the enemy, the truth is they are not. They are merely in the hands of our enemy.

Oh that we would intently focus and allow to become ingrained into our very being, the truth that we have a mutual enemy that

wants to destroy **any** and **all** of God's created humanity. It matters not to Satan the color of our skin, what language we speak or the name of the God we worship. Satan hates us all equally because God loves us just as equally and therefore died for all. God does not only love Christians nor does Satan only hate Christians, and therefore is not our enemy exclusively. Satan hates and despises us all and uses such events as those we remember today to not only hurt us, but to divide us as we take our gaze off of the true enemy.

There is one color that Satan hates, and because of that, he wants us to focus on and hate the differences between every color. Satan hates red. We may find that amusing since we so incorrectly envision him dressed in that color, with customary accessories of pitchforks, horns and pointed tails. And of course I'm speaking figuratively. But the truth remains that our common foe does not want us to realize that the color of the life blood of all those created "in God's Image" is red. We are all the same in our most basic attributes. The color of our blood is not dependent upon the spelling of our last names.

But of greater horror to Satan is the blood of the uncreated one. The red blood of the Creator shed for the sins of the creature is the only thing capable of "tearing down the dividing wall of hostility" that he has tirelessly worked to create.

American Navy Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry on September 10, 1813, made the statement, "We have met the enemy and they are ours". On April 22, 1970, celebrating the first National

Earth Day, the cartoonist Walt Kelly modified the quote when he had his character Pogo say, "We have seen the enemy, and he is us." On September 11, 2001, Brothers and Sisters, we must modify it once more, "We have seen the enemy, and it is Satan." and the red blood shed by the Savior, he greatly fears. We must remember where and with whom our true struggle lies.

This leads me to the last thing I want us to remember as our minds journey back in time; great sacrifices were made that day and every time tragedy of any kind approaches. Jesus told us that there is no greater love that one can possess than the love that leads one to be willing to die for a friend. In stressing the love that God has for us, Paul tells the church in Rome, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die." If great love is to die for a friend and exceptional love is to occasionally die for someone who is good, how marvelous is the love willing to die for strangers? Strangers potentially different from us, who may not think or believe like us?

The death toll of 9/11 was 2,996 individuals; 2,606 in the twin towers of the World Trade Center, 125 at the Pentagon and 265 passengers aboard four airplanes. What adds to our emotional distress is the facts that the majority of them, like the majority of us, did not wake up that morning knowing that another morning would not come. I am aware that we need to stress the frailty of life and how we should live each day as if it will be our last. But in reality, we generally don't. Little

thought is given to this matter until events like 9/11 become brutal reminders of this sobering truth.

Of that gruesome number however, were men and women who every day step out knowing full well that there is a chance they will not return; that they may be called on to give their lives up for a friend, a good person or even a stranger. We call these courageous servants “first responders” and many of us know and love individuals, family and friends within this fraternity. More than 400 “first responders” did not return but instead left us that morning. And as others were fearfully running away from the turmoil, these brave ones ran against the stream and the odds towards it. It matters not if they did so fearlessly or filled with the most common of human emotions, they ran just the same. Without their selflessness, the number of victims would undoubtedly be much higher. And there were those who were willing to make the sacrifice but did not die, at least not that day, but more than 1,400 of those brave individuals have since past because of their efforts and their exposure.

And then there are the stories of ones we do not know about because their sacrificial actions were not chronicled or names remembered because they were not listed among the deceased. One such servant was LT. Heather “Lucky” Penney. Heather was the first female to be granted the honor of being a F16 fighter pilot. Her group, stationed at Andrew Air Base, had just finished a training mission when the news arrived that a plane had crashed into Tower 1. When just minutes later a second plane flies into Tower 2, they realized there would be more. Lt. Penney

and Col. Marc Sasseville were ordered to go airborne and bring down United 93. Because of the urgency that emergencies dictate, there would be no time to replace the practice rounds with live ammunition, the procedure could take an hour. Their mission was not to shoot down the plane but to, “ram it out of the sky”. A true suicide mission!! Her willingness to give her life, even with the knowledge that innocent passengers would also perish, is truly amazing. There is an additional layer that adds to the significance and wonder. Lt. Penney’s father was a commercial pilot flying for United Airline based on the eastern seaboard and she had no way of knowing if her willingness to die **for** and equally as important, **with** others would cause her to be included among that “others” list.

Sacrifices to save lives. Sacrifices to preserve unity. Sacrifices to keep others, even strangers as well as those we love and those who hate us, from the eternally destructive clutches of our true adversary. Sacrifices of self to the glory of the Father. And since these were the sacrifices that Jesus made for us, not only out of love for a friend, or a good man, or even a stranger but a love for ones who declared him the enemy, should we not also be willing to do the same.

Unfortunately the lessons we swore never to forget 15 years ago, have faded. Difficult to imagine since this act has literally changed a generation. But there is a greater tragedy, because there was an event that not only changed a generation, it has changed every generation since. An act that rewrote history,

gave love its definition, made that elusive word – **hope** – a reality and gave a face to grace.

Today, let us never forget the lessons from the past. Lessons woven into the collective mental fabric of our live by the likes of 9/11. But even more the demonstration made not only by the way Jesus lived but even more by the way, the how and the why that Jesus died.

I struggled to determine which song would be the most fitting for us to sing, following my attempt at presenting this morning thoughts in an appropriate and timely manner. I considered “Lead Me to Calvary” solely for the first verse and refrain:

*King of my life, I crown Thee now,
Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow,
Lead me to Calvary.
Lest I forget Gethsemane,
Lest I forget Thine agony;
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lead me to Calvary.*

I, instead, settled on “I am Resolved” because of its announcement of intended action. So before we are lead in this proclamation together, I have just one more thought.

There no better way to demonstrate our desire to never forget than to incorporate within ourselves the prayer of Father Mychal Judge. As a chaplain for the NYFD, Father Judge served at the station in the very shadow of the World Trade Center and was listed as one of the first victims as he refused to leave the rubble of the South Tower.

He has been remembered best by his most often repeated prayer:

Lord, take me where you want me to go, let me meet who you want me to meet, tell me what you want me to say, and keep me out of your way.

Not that this prayer is not perfect and complete, but if I could add one more thought:

Help me remember what you want me to hold on to...