

“Belonging to God”

Romans 14:1-12

September 11, 2011

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost / Rally Sunday

Prayer: As we now open your word and prepare our hearts to receive it, teach us what we need to know and show us what we need to do to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

No one who lived through it will ever forget where they were the moment they received the news that the World Trade Center had been attacked. Some moments are so profound—so frozen in time, that you judge all other moments by what came before and by what came after them. September 11, 2001 was such a moment, for the world, really.

I was in my office at the Broad Street Presbyterian Church in downtown Columbus, Ohio that Tuesday morning, ten years ago today. My phone rang and it was a church member who had been sitting in a doctor’s waiting room watching television when the morning programming was interrupted. She watched for a little while and then called me to ask if I’d heard what had happened. I turned on a television at the church and stood watching in disbelief when the second plane struck.

Like most of you, I’m sure, you can recall the shock and horror, the utter disbelief and confusion that transformed that otherwise picture perfect fall morning into one of the greatest nightmares in our young country’s history.

I told the church staff that they were free to do whatever they needed to do and then I went home. How could I have possibly written a sermon that day based on the Lectionary text for that Sunday about a widow’s search for a lost coin? A real missed opportunity I’ve since regretted, given the agonizing images that would haunt us in those days immediately after, of people desperately searching for their missing loved ones—holding up photos of those who were no more. And I went home to watch unfold on television whatever was happening. What was happening? Who was behind this? Where and when would it end? It seemed to strike a blow to the heart of who we are as a country.

Standing in the pulpit that Sunday after, in the most packed sanctuary I’d ever seen, I have never felt more inadequate as a preacher. I preach hope all the time. There are only so many great preaching themes, you know, and hope is one of the better ones. But in the face of that kind of horror and devastation, what do you say?

I wasn’t alive during Pearl Harbor. I vaguely remember the tail end of Vietnam. Although alive at the time, I don’t remember the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, or Martin Luther King Jr. or Bobby Kennedy. I was dealing with my own shock, fear and confusion. I wanted to go to church myself and hear someone else preach a sermon that morning. Someone older and wiser, someone who had tasted more of life than I had and who could assure me that in spite of this unthinkable thing that had happened, everything would ultimately be ok.

I made it through that Sunday and it seems like a blur to me now, ten years later. But in the lead up to this ten year anniversary, I have been thinking back to that day and to those times that immediately followed.

For a brief time there was such unity in the country and around the world. It was so unprecedented and it felt so good that it was, for me, at least, one of the first tangible balms for my wounded soul in those early weeks after 9-11. In the days immediately after the attacks, America showed incredible restraint that I saw as a sign of her real strength and that made me so proud to be an American.

And our elected officials all put aside their partisanship and behaved like the leaders we had hoped they were when we elected them in the first place. President Bush didn't think twice about allocating billions of dollars for New York's recovery and Democrats went against their instincts and agreed to the Patriot Act as we pulled together to address our unprecedented situation. It was an unbelievable time in our national life.

In a men's Bible study I was leading the following week at the Broad Street Church, we were all talking about the events of the previous week and the latest developments that were continuing to unfold. I pronounced, in a rather cliché sort of way, that nothing would ever be the same again—that the events of 9-11 had changed everything.

That's when John Carnahan, a dear saint of the church, a retired lawyer, a student of history and life-long Presbyterian, an elder in the truest sense of the word, spoke up and said something to the effect, "Sure they will, Dave. This country has been through terrible things before and we've been able to overcome them. This is a terrible thing but we'll overcome this as well." And then he said, "I think we should put the towers back up...and add a few more floors!"

At the time, I thought he was merely being stoic. Maybe he was in denial. But I've come to understand his comments differently. Given John Carnahan's solid faith, a faith that allows plenty of room of the grandest of questions to be considered, but which always holds like an anchor, I think his comments were really an appropriate corrective to my over-the-top statement that "everything had changed." While much changed that day, John Carnahan was right that not everything had changed.

And what hasn't changed are the things that really matter. The valuing of freedom and the recognition that it is a gift worth protecting and defending. In a very real and fundamental way, life itself has not changed. Following 9-11, babies were born and baptized. Young people got married with eyes toward a long and hopeful future together. Young people grew and graduated and started jobs and families, while older people aged and retired.

And yes, there have been setbacks, given our economy and this current period of national drift, but the sun keeps rising and setting, the tides continue to go in and out and the planets remain in their orbits. And God can still be trusted. If the events of that September 11 taught us anything it is that human life is precious and fragile and that ultimately, it is about something much larger than our individual selves.

On the one hand, it's a somber note on which to celebrate Rally Sunday, a typically festive day in the life of the church when we've all returned from our summer sojourns to kick off another church year. There was a lot of discussion among my clergy colleagues as to what to do with this day, and of course one's context makes a big difference.

At First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, not too far from Ground Zero and where my friend Jon Walton is the pastor, today will be a different day than it is I think for us. Jon arrived as the new pastor about a week before 9-11 and in the next two weeks did seven funerals for church members.

But ten years is a long time especially for those of us who did not directly lose a loved one that day. And while we still bear some scars and we still feel the lingering effects of an economic downturn which has not been helped by our response to the events of that day, we have, I suspect, in many ways moved on.

And I'm comforted by passages like this one from Romans that we often hear at funerals and memorial services about how whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords. The fact that we belong to God has not changed and it will never will.

Paul was writing to the early church in Rome attempting to settle some of their disputes, which for them, given the cultural context, had to do with dietary restrictions as a sign of one's faithfulness to God. Also at issue was

the sacred nature of certain days. Essentially, those early Christians, coming out of various cultural and religious backgrounds, were accustomed to their own sets of procedures and their own sense of right and wrong as they had inherited it from their forbearers.

Today, and for us, issues of dietary restrictions and the sacredness of certain days over and against other days, seems petty. And Paul essentially writes to tell them to stop judging one another. What is important for some simply isn't for others, and vice versa. He's giving the local church tremendous leeway in terms of how best they choose to be faithful.

And he's assuring them that God accepts the honor and praise of both the eaters and the abstainers, and of those who consider one day more sacred than another as well as those who consider every day sacred. In other words, these issues are not important enough that you should be fighting with each other over them. And then, as if to put things into perspective for them, Paul reminds them,

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he may be Lord of both the dead and the living.

And I have to believe that Paul told them that *not* simply to get them to stop arguing with one another, but because in the end those things simply don't matter—they don't matter to God and they shouldn't have mattered to them. Because when an otherwise good and happy life is interrupted by the unthinkable and you find yourself standing in your darkest hour, is it really the knowledge that you've eaten or abstained in order to be faithful that will comfort you most? What is going to matter most in times like that is not our own faithfulness but rather God's faithfulness to us. And that never changes.

In a world filled with uncertainty, a world that frequently makes very little sense, a world where things change so fast and in staggering proportions, I'm comforted to know that some things never change.

And even though I cannot begin to comprehend it, my faith allows me to find great hope by trusting, for example, that in God's good time all things will work together for good for those who love God. And that in whatever happens in this world and to us personally, of good or of ill, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Knowing that we are loved like that gives us the courage and strength to move forward from the bleakest of circumstances because whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords.

And so on this Rally Sunday as I look around this morning, I can't help but think of the saints who demonstrated that in previous generations who gathered in this place. I think of the times when they would have gathered in this sanctuary because they were not sure where the world was headed or because they were all too sure of where the world was headed and they were frightened. Their fear drew them into this room where they heard scripture read, where they prayed, and where they perhaps sang from the deepest places of their hearts, *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.*

And they also did what the generations of faithful have always done, in good times and in bad, in times of war and times of peace, in years of prosperity and real hardship, they gathered here to help them carry on with life—to worship, to celebrate a baptism or a wedding, as well as to experience the loving embrace of those who would stand with them to say goodbye to loved ones who are no more. And whatever else may have been happening in the world, they'd gather to light candles on Christmas Eve and to sing about a baby born in a manger, and they'd gather as well to bravely sing about how Christ the Lord is risen today, on Easter.

Some things change but some things never change!

Today we begin another exciting program year in this life of this congregation. We begin it under construction, preparing for our long term future and sensing that God is doing a new thing with us. In a moment we will rededicated a restored stained glass window, made possible by the capital campaign which has as its official title, appropriately enough, "Our Hope for Years to Come." And on this tenth anniversary of that September morning ten years ago today, we begin the new church year mindful of the fact that some things change, and change dramatically, but also in deep gratitude that some things never change.

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.
So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords.

Amen.