

The Spiritual Lessons of September 11

2996. Each one unique. Each one a victim. Each one precious in the sight of God. The total number of deaths resulting from the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001 was 2996. It is an immense number.

And not all were American citizens. Victims from 115 different nations were killed in Manhattan, at the Pentagon and on US Air Flight 93. 319 Firefighters were lost when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center came down, along with 50 policemen. When the day was over, 3,051 children were without a parent.

The tenth anniversary of this sad day is now upon us. And as it would happen, the 11th of September falls this year on a Sunday. Christians of course will be in church on Sunday as we come together to remember the Day of Resurrection and as we proclaim the saving death of Jesus Christ. So this Sunday will indeed be a day for remembrance and reflection, in the context of the faith community. I can't think of a better, more appropriate place to be this Sunday morning.

As I have pondered all of this, several "spiritual" lessons come to mind.

First, we are again confronted by tragic and unjust death. How could a loving God permit such a thing? Why were some people spared and why did others die? These are eternal questions which we constantly face. The truth is that there are no answers. But we can begin by acknowledging what is beyond question- evil and sin are real and have horrible consequences. For Christians, the image of Jesus Christ hanging and dying on the cross is a constant reminder that unjust suffering and death knows no boundaries.

As much as we might like to change the human condition and live in a world where people respect the differences and the dignity of each other, September 11 reminds us that evil is all around us. All we can do is the resolve to "overcome evil with good" as St. Paul counsels in Romans 12:21.

Which brings me to a second thought- our response to evil, as people of faith, will be complex and measured. There will be occasions for us to fight evil and make no peace with oppression. And some of that fight will involve military force. There will be other occasions which call for us to forgive those who sin against us. People of faith will not always agree on the right course of action in response to evil. But we can agree that we can't be totally passive.

Third, it should be apparent to us that we do not live in a secure world. And to some extent, our attempts to achieve security are doomed to failure. For all our outlay of resources and technology and our effort to establish homeland security, we know that a determined or fanatically suicidal person can still overcome our defenses and wreak havoc. No, ultimately there is no such thing a complete security in this life. Life is fragile and temporary. Life is not fair. A life based on achieving security will be as unfulfilling as a life lived primarily to gain possessions and to be the winner.

Fourth, we can't change others. We can only change ourselves. The best way I know to make a systemic change of heart is to count your blessings. Getting "high on gratitude"! Not easy, in the face of suffering and death. But when we force ourselves to reflect on all that is right in the world, the things that are wrong begin to recede. We do have a different attitude and often, such a grateful attitude is contagious.

And finally, no list of "spiritual lessons" would be complete without remembering that when all is said and done, we only have God. We can get angry. We can feel that life has been unfair. We can feel alone. We can push God aside and believe that the only reality is what we can empirically, scientifically prove. But there always comes a moment when we recognize that we need the strength which is beyond us, when we admit we don't have all the answers. Christians will witness to the power of sacrificial love, as we have learned from the cross.

Yes, it is important for all of us in faith traditions to come together this weekend in prayer. And the real issue won't be what happened ten years, or since. The real issue for us is what we intend to do beginning today. As we take our next steps on that pilgrimage, may we feel the holy Presence of the one who walks besides us and join hands with one another.

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