

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

“9/11 – Fifteen Years Later”

A DAY NO ONE WILL FORGET!

Today marks the 15th year anniversary of an Islamic terrorist attack on our nation. 2996 people murdered - the worst loss of life of Americans in a day since World War 2. And the worst loss of life on American soil as the result of a foreign attack in the history of our nation. Everyone here who was alive and old enough to remember can recall exactly what they were doing on that day when they got the news. And no one would be the same.

For me, I remember looking forward to sleeping in that day. It was a Tuesday and I had a vestry meeting in the evening. I had just brought on Fr. Clark Hubbard as our new curate two months prior and was feeling really good about having a full-time assisting priest after two and a half years as rector on my own. The weather had been nice. My wife Kathleen had gotten up to send Arthur to kindergarten and was planning to go grocery shopping with Alyssa who was not even two at the time. And then at about 9:10 AM my wife woke me up to tell me that planes had hit the World Trade Center. Her brother had called to tell her to turn on the news after the second plane hit. And so I looked at the TV and saw the smoke and flame coming from the two towers. I didn’t want to believe it.

Awhile later, I called my parents and told them to turn on the TV, and we watched as President Bush addressed the nation and told us what was already apparent. We were under attack. As the morning unfolded, there was the news that the Pentagon had been hit by a jetliner and another flight had gone off radar - the one that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania due to the heroic efforts of the passengers on that plane led by Todd Beamer who said “Let’s roll” and who prevented the Muslim radicals from doing more damage – as it was apparent they were headed to hit the capital building or the White House.

A NATION BROUGHT TOGETHER

All of us were shocked, outraged, and united in our conviction to go after the perpetrators. America would never be the same. Church attendance soared across the nation. We had 515 in attendance the first Sunday after the attack – about 75 above the norm. US Flags were everywhere. Both Democrats and Republicans gathered together on the steps of the Capital and sang God Bless America. A service of mourning was held at the National Cathedral in DC. There was strong support for our President.

That was the good – and I might add the good also included the renewed vigilance against terrorism and filling the gaping holes in our national security as it pertains to the potential for nuclear, chemical, and biological attacks. Many in our nation turned to the Lord Jesus Christ for help, including our President and others in Congress. But there also has been the bad and the ugly.

The bad – it gave our government greater power and control over our citizenry – with the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security and the potential for abuse. It led to not just one war but two that were not adequately paid for and which inevitably led to the economic recession in 2008.

And in the case of Iraq, a war that was not adequately finished – both after the initial victory – the reconstruction was a fiasco and, of course, the final pullout – which, as is sadly the case with most botched efforts, was a purely political decision.

And the ugly - a destabilized Middle East, the rise of ISIS, and a nation that is more polarized than ever before with two dysfunctional presidential candidates that represent two dysfunctional political parties.

In fact, the threat we face today is arguably worse than the one we confronted in 2001; that is what the former leaders of the 9/11 Commission wrote on Saturday in the USA Today Op-ed page. The chairman, former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean, and vice-chairman, former Congressman Lee Hamilton emphasized the terrorism threat isn't just about us here at home — rather, it's a global issue. They called it "a spreading disease eating away at the foundation of the free, open and lawful international system."

One of the biggest issues Kean and Hamilton identified was the United States' failure to focus as much energy on combating ideology that leads to "Islamist terrorism" as it does trying to militarily eradicate the threat. That's one of the suggestions in the 9/11 Commission's report that the two men say hasn't been followed — or at least, pursued strongly enough — across both the Bush and Obama administrations. In other words, we can't expect to defeat this evil ideology with only bombs and bullets, it will only come from better ideas; and there is no better idea than the truth!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU AND ME?

So where is the hope in all this? What does this mean for you and me? First, I would like to put 9/11 into historical perspective – we need to understand the big picture both in terms of our nation and in terms of God's plan for our world.

You have heard me say before that every generation has its challenges. A generation is considered 20-40 years. When you look at our nation's history every 20-40 years we have had a cataclysmic event that has challenged and then shaped the nation. Think back (for you history lovers) to the French and Indian War which was really an extension of the real first world war (the Seven Years War) between the colonial powers of Europe. It was a stressful and uncertain time for the English colonies and laid the seeds for the American Revolution less than 20 years later. 30 years later there was the War of 1812 and the burning of Washington DC including the White House. Things looked bleak for awhile. And then in another 20 years came the Alamo (1836) and eventually the Mexican War (1846-48). In less than 15 years our nation became engulfed in our worst conflict ever - the Civil War. The following 30 years consisted of numerous "Indian Wars" and then the sinking of the USS Maine with the loss of 261 sailors in Havana Harbor, which in turn led to the Spanish American War in 1898. Just 17 years later, German U Boats sank the British passenger ship, the Lusitania, resulting in the deaths of nearly 1200 civilians, including 128 US citizens, and set the stage for our entrance into World War 1 (1917-18). 24 years later we suffered the attack on Pearl Harbor and our entrance into World War 2. 20 years afterwards came the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, followed by the Vietnam War and the race riots; and then 30 years later the turmoil of the 60's - 9-11. Do you see the pattern?

What is the present challenge of our day? It is not communism or Nazism or civil rights; it is radical Islam. The attack on 9/11 demonstrated this. Some may downplay this challenge but it is one of

the most dangerous forces out there. We are not just talking about ISIS. We are talking about the extremists of Sunni Islam and those of Shia Islam. Their sites are ultimately on Israel. But have you noticed that there hasn't been much hostile intent directed towards Israel lately? Why? Because the Sunni and Shia are busy fighting each other and everyone is focused on defeating ISIS. But once ISIS is taken care of, there will be others who will rise up to take the mantle of Islam and will renew their fight against Israel. Simply put, these problems are not going away and we need to recognize that fact.

Ultimately, we are part of a global struggle between good and evil that transcends borders, nations, and ethnic groups. In other words, there is a spiritual war going on. The political, religious, economic, educational, and entertainment world are all part of this battle. And we can literally get caught in the crossfire. That's what happened to all those who were killed on 9/11. There are no answers for why they were the ones who were caught in the middle. Just like there is no way to make sense of those two girls who were attacked by a depressed gunman in Texas last week.

But what we can do is make sense of it all when we understand it in context of God's plan for our world in dealing with the evil that so easily infiltrates our hearts and the hearts of others. Simply put, we are all lost with God. We are all losers without the Lord. There is no hope of victory without Jesus Christ.

That is what we heard in our parables from **Luke 15:1-10** this morning. *"Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*

3So He told them this parable, saying, 4"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5"When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9"When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10"In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

God wants to rescue us and make us winners. He wants us to make a difference for His Kingdom. He can take any tragedy and turn it around for His glory which is ultimately for our good. But that only comes from repentance – turning from self and turning to God in Christ.

So while the Middle East seems to be imploding, many Muslims are coming to Christ in the Middle East. While our nation is divided, God is still doing the work of His Kingdom through His Spirit and through His Church. That is where you and I come in. God is more concerned with how we respond to the circumstances of life more than the circumstances alone. Remember last week how Jesus spoke about the cost of discipleship? We are to take up our own crosses daily – deny ourselves and only then will be disciples worth our salt.

PRAYER IS THE BELIEVER'S GREATEST WEAPON

I believe one of the things that cataclysmic events teach us, is the importance of prayer; and not simply the type of prayer in the foxhole. Rather we should be people of prayer – communicating with God each and every day. Not just talking to Him but seeking the still small voice of the Holy Spirit and making sure God's Word is written upon the tablets of our hearts. How else can we discern the heart of the Father and His will for our lives?

Recently I was watching a documentary on the Fall of the Third Reich. It spoke of a man named Hans Georg Klamroth who had been a member of the Nazi Party for 10 years but he had become convinced that Hitler was leading Germany to its doom. So when he learned of the plot to assassinate Hitler in the summer 1944, he told no one. Later, after the assassination attempt failed, his inaction was found out by the Gestapo. He was brought up on trial, found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. In his last letter to his wife, he wrote "Teach the children to pray. I now know what it means." Prayer is the lifeblood of our relationship with God. It is the believer's greatest weapon against evil.

And informed prayer helps us get in tune with the Lord and His plans for our life and the lives of others. It should get our minds off ourselves and onto God's will and move us to action.

What is God's will? We heard it in Jesus' parables - to reduce the lostness of our world. How do we reduce the lostness of our world? – through what we say and what we do. The challenge is to bring every aspect of our lives under the authority of Jesus – that's one of the things that "in Jesus' name" means. To do something "in Jesus' name" means to do what He wants us to do. We pray "in Jesus' name" to set the stage for what we do in His name.

How are we individually contributing to reducing the lostness of our society? What can we as a church do to reduce the lostness in our community? That is a question we have been looking at as we recast our vision and mission. How can we more effectively reach the lost? How can we make a difference in Western New York and beyond? Those are questions that can't be answered without first seeking God in prayer. 9/11 was a great tragedy, but one that did not catch God by surprise. God's desire is that everyone come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And His desire is that we pray and work towards that end. It is the only hope for our world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!