

“BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE”

Matthew 18:21-35; Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-14

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Today, like millions of Americans everywhere, we remember the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and we mourn with the survivors of the victims of that day. Last Thursday, In Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to speak with the parents of one of those victims. Their daughter and her husband both worked at the World Trade Centers. Both were killed in the attack. Both were devout Muslims, as are the daughter's parents. For reasons of privacy, they asked me not to share their names, because alongside their grief stands an ever-present fear that Muslims who draw attention to themselves in America are increasingly targets of the growing Islamophobia in this country, a bigotry that shows its face in events as diverse as day-to-day avoidance or insults, the threatened Qur'an burnings on last year's anniversary of 9/11, proposed legislation in several states to make the adoption of Sharia law illegal, and the number of cases investigated by the Department of Justice of municipalities discriminating against Muslim communities when it comes to building and zoning issues. Since 2001, 23 such cases have made it to the notice of the DOJ. Sixteen of those cases have occurred in the past 18 months.

The 9/11 attacks were a terrible thing, a wanton act of violence to be condemned by all people who value justice, peace, and love of neighbor. But as with every event, there is the event itself, and then there is what we make of that event personally and corporately, how we place it in our world view, how we respond, in what perspective we frame it. For a moment after the event, I believe that we were a country at our best: an outpouring of sorrow and personal and financial support, neighbor standing with neighbor, our national rhetoric restrained. President Bush made it clear that the work of a few Islamic extremists was not representative of the values of mainstream Islam. But in my opinion, that moment passed too quickly, and the 9/11 attacks became the rallying cry for our war on terror, engaging our nation in two seemingly endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian and military casualties, playing a part in the increasing radicalization of people of many faiths and no faith at all, and making thousands of good, devout, peace-loving Muslims targets of suspicion, hatred, and bigotry.

I told you all in my Thought this week that I had and still have mixed feelings about drawing attention to this tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks. I do sincerely mourn the victims of that day and I pray for their families and friends. I do remember and honor the courage of police, fire fighters, and random strangers who risked and too often lost their lives trying to help those in danger. However, I am deeply troubled that the aftermath of the event has been for Americans in general to use this moment as the dividing line of history, a tragedy that trumps all others in our national mindset and response. Just under 3000 people were killed that day. And though I do not want to minimize the importance of those deaths, or the importance of our nation being attacked, in the decade since then, a minimum of 400,000 people have died as a result of the violence in Darfur, somewhere in excess of 30,000 persons in Libya, and on a different front, over 150,000 Americans have been killed by drunk drivers, and approximately 45,000 persons die each year in this country because of lack of health care, and 25,000 in fire-arms related homicides.

Where do we, as Christians, stand in the midst of all these numbers? How do they affect our perspective? When we remember the violence and tragedy of September 11th, what do we make not only of the event itself, but of the ten year legacy we have created from that event? What have we learned? What is the story we would like to tell on the 20th anniversary?

This morning's gospel lesson—which I didn't choose; it was the lectionary text for the day—is an intriguing passage to consider as we ask these questions. Peter comes to Jesus, saying, "If a member of the church sins against me, how many times do I forgive? As many as seven? And Jesus' startling answer is, "No, seven is not enough. Try 77," which is not meant to be an exact number, but Jesus' way of telling Peter that he's not even in the right ballpark. And then Jesus goes on to deliver the parable about the master and the slave. And the reason why this parable is so interesting is that Peter's question to Jesus was really very narrow: if a church member sins against me, if one of those I consider my people does me harm, how should I behave? In the parable of the King and the slave, the question is broadened. First of all, the King and the slave would not have been like people. More importantly, in the Roman Empire, slaves came from every race, religion, and ethnic group from the British Isles to Africa. The question in the parable becomes not, how should I behave towards the people like me, but how should people behave towards other people. All the distinctions important to Peter, all the distinctions that we, today, still fall into making, are wiped away. It's not a question of how the rich should treat the poor, or the poor should treat the rich, or Christians should treat other Christians, or Americans should treat other Americans or the people we think of as being like us. Jesus is talking about how people should be treated by other people in a completely global sense.

When tragedy or acts of terror or war or any other sins are perpetrated against us, we choose our response. One way to go, one legacy, is to place our pain, our fear, our outrage on a pedestal, to so immerse ourselves in our own loss and vulnerability that it becomes a thing special, a thing separate, a thing somehow bigger, more important, more motivating than any other pain, any other fear, any other outrage. It makes our vision smaller, dividing the world ever more precisely and divisively into those like us and everyone else.

The alternative route, the alternative legacy, is to allow our pain, our loss, our outrage to open us outwards, to see it as of a piece with all the world's peoples' pain, loss, outrage. We have been the victims of terror so we better understand other victims. We have lost those we love in senseless, tragic destruction, and so have many others around the world. We are outraged by an attack on innocents, and therefore we will be outraged by any attack on innocent people. It's not a question of how we should behave towards those like us, or even people who like us. It's a question of how human beings should treat other human beings.

In my mind, we have, in the past ten years, let the horror to the 9/11 attacks take us ever further down the first road. We have chosen to let this event divide us sharply from other nations, devoting more and more of our resources to the pursuit of war while all but ignoring the suffering of so many others, and we grow increasingly divided from each other within our nation. We have a government that barely functions because of its divisiveness. We have become obsessed with immigration issues. And I can't stop thinking of the Muslim mother and father of the 9/11 victims, both native-born Americans, hollow-eyed last Thursday not only from grief but

also from fear of their fellow citizens. Is this the legacy we would continue for the next ten years?

We can choose to do it differently, you know. We can create a different legacy. We can pull our national pain off its pedestal, while still according it respect, and move forward in a different direction. But that's not just going to happen organically. We're going to have to teach ourselves to think differently about our privileged place in the world and work to put down that sense of privilege. We're going to have to make different decisions in our day to day life—become more restrained in our life style in order that we might become generous, both in spirit and with our resources. If we want things to change, we're going to have to make some noise—to stand vocally alongside not just the Muslim community but all of our neighbors who are being marginalized—and we need to model the kind of dialogue, the kind of result we want to see. One of the other people recognized with me in Washington D.C. was a Muslim doctor who set up interfaith medical clinics for the poor of his city. On his wrist was a bracelet that read, “Be the change you wish to see.” We're all heard that before, but seeing it on this man's arm gave it a new freshness for me. The last thing this nation, this world needs is a new group of self-righteous ones declaring that they have all the answers, and working to sideline other ideas. Remember the parable of the King and the slave. This is how human beings treat other human beings. Creating a new legacy of openness, of educated dialogue, of compromise, of looking always to the common good—not just to our own country's common good, but the earth's common good—has to start somewhere. It might as well be with you and with me. We all need to work harder to be the change we wish to see.

I don't know who will be standing in this pulpit 10 years from now but I pray that he or she will have cause to celebrate that day, to stand here and rejoice that we have turned a corner, that we have stood with the people of the world and made a difference. I pray that he or she will be able to preach the sermon we long to hear, and say that out of evil has come good and out of death has come new life. May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.