

## The Day that Changed the World

Sterling UMC

September 11, 2011

Deuteronomy 30:19-20, John 15:12-13

Ten years ago today the clear blue skies of New York, Washington D.C. and rural Pennsylvania were pierced by hijacked airplanes and a diabolical plan to pierce the soul of our nation. Ten years ago today we woke up from our dreaming and found ourselves living in a nightmare. Ten years ago we watched, as planes became missiles, icons were reduced to piles of rubble, lives were lost and hearts were broken. Ten years ago we watched as our false sense of security was shattered and our way of life was forever changed.

There is not one of here this morning who will not remember where we were on that morning. We have it etched in our minds. Where were you and what were you feeling when these things happened?

I will always remember exactly where I was when I first heard the news. I was sitting in the drive through line at McDonald's waiting for my breakfast before beginning what I had thought would be just another ordinary day when I heard on the radio about the plane crashing into the first tower of the World Trade Center. At first I thought it must just have been an accident, a small plane crashing into the giant skyscraper. But then I came on into the church there in Danville and learned that a second plane had hit the other tower and I knew it was no accident. So I rushed home to watch the horror unfold before my eyes on the television. I remember the shock of seeing the towers collapse, and then seeing the devastation at the Pentagon. I remember wondering if United Flight 93 was hijacked as well, and then seeing the wreckage of the crash site in Pennsylvania.

I had thought would be just another ordinary day. But it was not just an ordinary day. It was a day that changed me, our nation, and our world. It's changed us in so many ways. For some it changed the direction of their lives and careers, motivating them to serve our country in specific ways to protect us and to seek to prevent something like this from ever happening again. For the families who lost loved ones they are reminded of how their world has changed every time they see that empty chair around the dinner table. We are reminded how much our world has changed every time we travel and go through one of our country's airports. We are reminded of just how much our world has changed every time we see one of those flag draped caskets returning from a foreign land.

Today as we focus and reflect on the events of that day, what I want you to see is that on that day ten years ago what we saw is both the best and the worst of the human condition. We saw on that day what we could be at our tragic worst and what we might be at our very best.

As a pastor one of the questions that everyone seemed to be asking right after this happened was, "Why?" And some people, were first asking that question of God. Why? And their assumption that went with that was that everything that happens, if it happens, it must be God's will. And there are a lot of Christian people who believe that, maybe even some of you here in this room believe that. That is not something that I believe nor is it something that I believe the Bible teaches us. Now I will tell you that reason we don't believe that is because when you look at the Bible what you will find is that the Bible is the story, over and over again, of human beings doing what God did not want them to do and then God picking up the pieces afterwards. And then God trying to heal and redeem the suffering created by human beings. Starting with the very opening chapters of the Bible where Cain kills his brother Abel. Actually even before that

where Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God forbade them to eat. And all the way to the end of the Bible in the Book of Revelation where we find the forces of evil trying to destroy the forces of good. None of that was God's will. And God comes in to try to heal the brokenness that results from that. And so to say that this was God's will, something this monstrous, this grotesque and demonic is heresy.

Most of us certainly recognized that this was not God's will and so then we wanted to understand what was the evil that precipitated this? And that was the question that most people were asking by the end of the first few days. Now this is a question that ten years later we at least have some answers for. We at least have a much better understanding of the ideology and the hatred that was behind these horrific events. Now we know that on that day the 19 suicide attackers in what they saw as sort of a holy act of war, justified to accomplish their own evil desires, weaponized four airplanes and they killed nearly 3000 innocent people.

And we look at this and as we see it this represents the darkest of what human beings can do to one another. No distinction between combatant and non-combatants, just violence and hate manifest in an act that we saw unfold before our eyes. And one of the things I want you to see, that we all need to see, is that this is not just about Osama bin Laden and a group of 19 suicide attackers with airplanes, but the darkness that led to this is not just ideology or protest, it is that there is something that is inside here that leads someone to move from protesting and wanting to change positively the world to doing something so awful that the human brain can't quite comprehend it.

And when theologians talk about that something that makes it possible for human beings to even imagine even doing something like this, they talk about this in terms of original sin. They talk about something in the human heart that is broken or twisted. There's much in us that is good, and we have this potential for doing great good and wonderful things, but inside of us there is also this dark side, and we hear this dark side calling to us. And we find ourselves drawn to it. And while 9/11 represents the apex of the evil that can be done, most of us find ourselves somewhere down the hill of the apex struggling with evil from time to time ourselves, and violence, and anger, and slander, and hatred, and words that we speak that hurt other people, and we do it all the time. No we don't go so far as these awful things that happened on 9/11, but we all have a little piece of this dark place in our souls. We all have the potential to do horrible things. We see it in the news every week.

So the first point of this message is that there is this little piece of the dark side in each of us and we have to at least ask the question why so that we do not repeat history.

But the second thing I want to take us to is this. There was another day that changed the world. And that other day that changed the world happened 2000 years ago. There was a power that was an occupying force in the Middle East, it was called Rome. And the Roman soldiers were there. And there were people who despised the Roman soldiers being their land. And there were zealots who thought they could get rid of the Romans by violence. Their hope was that through acts of violence they could scare the Romans out of their land.

And then Jesus came along and he said something different. He said, "Can I tell you the strategy that is God's strategy. It is the only one that stands a chance of changing the world the way you hope it to be changed. Here it is: Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." He said, "When a Roman soldier strikes you on the cheek, you turn the other cheek. And when they demand you carry their sack for a mile, you carry it for a second mile. And when they ask for you to give them your coat you give them your cloak also. In these ways you will

have a chance to change their hearts and the world will be changed. "This is the answer," he said. And then at the Last Supper he says, "Listen, the world will know that you are my disciples in that you practice love toward one another." And what that love looks like he described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. "When you see somebody that's in need you stop and help them. It doesn't matter if they are a Jew or a Samaritan. It doesn't matter if they are of your nationality or not or your political persuasion. And he uses the Samaritan as an example as he stopped and helped the Jew. And then he said this, "Greater love has no one than this that they lay down their life for their friends."

That night Jesus was arrested by religious leaders who in the name of God arrested the Son of God; not recognizing him, blinded by their own religiosity and hypocrisy. They arrested the Son of God and they tried him and found him worthy of death and then they took him to the Romans. And you remember Pontius Pilate tried Jesus and he came back to the people and he said, "I see no reason to put this man to death." They cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And the gospel writer tells us that Pilate didn't have the courage to say, "No" to the act of violence that was being asked of him and instead, wishing to satisfy the crowd, he had Jesus tortured and nailed to a cross where he died a slow and violent death for six hours. And Jesus hanging on the cross said, "Let me just show you one last time what I have been trying to teach you. It's what I came to teach you." And he looks at those who crucified him and you remember the prayer that he prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

This is the Jesus path. This calls forth your better side. You have two choices in life. You have the choice of giving into the darkness and allowing your words and your actions to lead you to support the kind of violence that we can do to one another. Or we have the chance to demonstrate sacrificial love and it's the latter of those that has the potential to change the world.

Which is what we saw on 9/11 too. On 9/11 we saw this grotesque demonic picture, but from the stories that unfolded from that day we also saw the Jesus way manifest again and again with hundreds of people who laid down their lives for other people.

I want to tell you just one of their stories. I read this story this week. There was a man by the name of Wells Crowther. Wells had just graduated from Boston College in 2000 a year before 9/11 where he was a member of the lacrosse team. He had worked as a volunteer fireman while he was in high school and he had just gotten a job at Sandler O'Neill and Partners as an equities trader. Their offices were on the 104<sup>th</sup> floor of the South Tower. When United Flight 175 struck the South Tower, it struck at about the 78<sup>th</sup> floor.

Now here's what had happened. When the first plane hit the North Tower the people in the South Tower got mixed messages. Some of them were told to evacuate the building and others were told, because at first it was thought to be an accident and that there was greater danger if they were out on the plaza around the World Trade Center, they were told to stay in their places. Well after a few minutes the people felt that they needed to begin leaving those top floors and many of them as they began to do that had made their way down to about the 78<sup>th</sup> floor. Wells had made his way down to somewhere in that vicinity. He was I suppose a few floors down from there. And the airplane crashed into the side of the South Tower of the World Trade Center around the 78<sup>th</sup> floor and almost everybody on the 78<sup>th</sup> floor was killed instantly. But there were a handful of people who were still alive. And suddenly the door opens up into this darkened room, a room filled with smoke and the sounds, the terrible sounds. And Wells barges into that room and he cries out, "Is anyone still alive in here? Is anyone still alive?" And there were a handful of women who cried out, "I'm here. Help me!" He had a woman on his back that he had been carrying already and he took another woman that he had found there and

he said, "I'll come back for the rest of you." And he carried the two women down 15 flights of stairs to where there were they could get help from the rescue workers who were there. And then he went back up. And he took out two more people. And before the day was through, Wells was credited with saving 18 people that he kept going back up inside the building to get out. The last time he was seen he was running back into the building wearing the red bandana that he always carried with him that had been given to him by his father, who was also a firefighter, covering his nose and mouth with other firefighters with the Jaws of Life trying to extricate others who were trapped up top when the building finally collapsed.

"Greater love has no one than this that they lay down their life for their friends." What motivated a Wells Crowther to go back into the building knowing that he was likely to die if he kept going back in? The same thing that motivated Jesus to show us what ultimate love is as he hung their on the cross. A selfless sacrificial love that changes the world.

I want you to hear how the apostle Paul heard this in the first century after he became a convert to the Christian faith. He told the Romans these things. He said, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: (and here he quotes the Old Testament) "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." (The burning coals are shame. When you show love in the face of hate even to your enemies, you shame them, and you have the potential to change them.) And he goes on, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21)

We have this picture on 9/11 of what evil looks like and then we have this picture in these kinds of responses of what love looks like. We can choose to love, or hate. Unwilling to make us robots, God has given us freedom. I have never killed anyone, but I have, at times, been cruel, selfish and unkind to others. I have frequently chosen evil over good. Perhaps you can identify. We live in a world of choice, and too often the choices are evil ones.

Jesus said this in the Gospels, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "There are really two ways in life. There is a way that leads to death and destruction and pain. And he says it's broad and wide and many people take that path. And then he said there's another way in life, and it's narrow and hard and few people take that path but it's the way that leads to life." And in every single one of us, we have this potential, created in the image of God to do good, to bless with our lips, with our mouths, with our actions, to return kindness for the wounds that other people inflict upon us. And every one of us has the possibility of giving in to the darkness, looking out only for ourselves and allowing our words and actions to lead to acts that hurt and harm and cause pain and sorrow. You have those two choices. Always. Every single day.

Moses said it this way, back near the beginning of the Bible in the Book of Deuteronomy, he said, "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you," (He had just laid out before the people of Israel the commandments of God.) "That I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your children may live."

As we stand here today, as we reflect upon 9/11 and recount the stories we look back and remember. We reflect upon the horrific tragedy inflicted upon us on that day and the way it changed our world and the tremendous toll that it has taken on us all in the decade since. But the real aim is to look ahead and ask, "Where we go from here?" And on 9/11 we saw the worst

of humanity and what any of might or could be. And we also saw a picture of what Christ calls us to be and the best of humanity. I invite today in your personal actions, in your conversations, your everyday decisions, in how you live your life and look at the rest of the world to choose life.

I concluded with these words from an unknown author that I believe summarize all I feel today and all that I have tried to share with you:

“GAZING UPWARD, we saw plumes of fire and smoke staining the morning sky.

Gazing upward again minutes later, another fireball in another tower. Then, before our disbelieving eyes, both mighty towers crashed to the earth, surrounding the city with acrid smoke and concrete dust and the sad silence of uncounted lives suddenly snuffed out.

Gazing upward, our hearts were broken.

Hate won the day. But it cannot win the war.

Hate cannot win against the unbridled bravery of the men and women who went into those buildings to serve and to save. Such people, a term like “hero” cannot begin to measure.

Hate cannot win against a city and a nation of people devoting their time and treasure, risking their safety, and donating their very blood to help the fallen and their families.

Hate cannot win against a people discovering again what we have always known: the meaning of community, the bond of patriotism, the value of helping others.

Hate cannot win against a society that stands tall when kneeling on bended knee.

Hate cannot win against hope.

Like the dust around us, so much is still unsettled. For awhile, the questions shouted from our souls may drown out the whispered answers that time and wisdom wait to tell. Yet, though our souls ache, there is hope. In our darkest hour, there is hope: carrying us, counting every tear, knowing us and aching to be known.

For in all that mankind has ever chosen to worship, the God of the Bible stands alone as the only God who ever lost His own child.

Gazing upward, our hearts were broken.

Yet gazing upward, we can find our hope.”

AMEN