

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"A Shift in History"
Dr. J. Dent

September 11, 2011

I've asked Steve and Lillian to come and read an announcement and comments that was on this date ten years ago...

If we think of world history as a Sunday car drive, certainly one of the shifts in the drive came on September 11, 2001. Most of us know where we were on that date. One of my elders in our small town in BC called me early in the morning, around 7 am, to turn on the TV and look at what was happening in New York. I was just able to catch the second plane going into the building live. I called my mom a little bit later in the morning. My father had died earlier in that year.

No matter how detached we sometimes think we are from one another, it is these moments in history that remind us that we are indeed linked to one another, even with no one person related to us or close to us in New York. The great majority of us in North America were introduced to a new kind of war that day called "terrorism." We knew it existed in some parts of the world. We know from history that it had been used in many places and many times. But this was the first time in the modern or post-modern era where the quote-unquote safest places such as downtown New York City or the Pentagon were no longer safe.

The numbers on that day were staggering, the thousands in the twin towers dying, hundreds of first responders, fire-fighters, police dying on that day, and then hundreds, maybe thousands since from illnesses related to that day. On that same day, thousands of people were in aircraft bound for the United States. As you may know, about five hundred flights were over the North Atlantic on that day. About half of these returned to Europe, but the other half were past the point of no return, so had to proceed to North America, while American air space was shut down due to fears of further hijacking. You may also know that Canada's Cabinet was debating how to deal with so many flights. They decided to divert planes away from the major centers of Toronto and Montreal because these were still just minutes in the air from other American targets. Thus Atlantic Canada and Newfoundland had more than their share of airline passengers landing on that day. Gander has been focused upon by the news media, because thirty eight flights landed there

with 6600 passengers, Gander itself only being a town of 10,000. President Obama has noted the generosity of Canada and of Newfoundland in particular by how wonderfully treated those passengers were in Gander.

We too took in passengers here. In fact we at St. David's could have told our story again on TV, but CBC couldn't get a hold of us on Friday morning, although I did see pictures from our hall from that day. We took in 69 persons, I am told, and a cat. Someone even went out in the middle of the night to find kitty litter to help out.

The beauty of the tragedy of 9/11 is the wonder of the hospitality shown to strangers on that day. It is the "opposite spirit" of the terrorism which made it all happen in the first place. Strangers were made friends. Random acts of kindness were shown and are being perpetuated to this day. Friendships and new bonds of love and care and generosity were poured out on that day of horror and the days that followed. This is the miracle of 9/11. God can turn the worst of human choices into the best of human traits. We can choose to move from the helplessness of watching the event to actually doing something for those who are among us.

And the Scriptures today remind us that Jesus has been teaching this for a long time. In the midst of the military occupation of the Romans of his day in his town and country, he taught about forgiveness, rather than hatred and revenge. He even taught this within the community of faith. It is not about how many times you forgive, it is about resisting the almost overpowering desire to see someone suffer because they have made you suffer in some way. Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount is even clearer: Moses wrote an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the *lex talionis*, which itself was a limiting of tit for tat, rather than gang revenge or the wiping out of a whole village in retaliation for one murder or one assault. Jesus clearly puts a new value of forgiveness and non-violence before us. He even speaks of loving enemies, which is difficult for the best of us, whether we believe we have enemies or not. Loving the unlovable. Forgiving the unforgiveable. These were the values Jesus was teaching us and still hopes that we will learn. Terror begetting terror never does anyone any good.

Yet we are also encouraged to not judge what leaders did in response to 9/11, lest we be judged by the same standard we use against others. It is easy in the years that have followed to criticize and condemn the American president of the day. I would not have wanted to be the commander in chief

of the US military force late in 2001. He had to do something. Many have easily condemned both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and perhaps rightly so. But we have the luxury of condemning from afar. What should have been done? Should al-Qaeda and Bin Laden been left alone to plan the next event?

These are difficult political questions that I do not pretend to have any answers. I am annoyed with those political analysts who seem to continually know better than those in actual power. Of course, they too do the best they can to bring their perspective to the table, thus doing their job.

Paul in Romans 14 brings us back to the idea that some people will always have more freedom in their faith to do some things and that others would not. In their day and culture, it was about eating food offered to idols and about respecting the Jewish holidays or not. In our day, it is debates over drinking alcohol and gambling, and whether these activities should be in the church.

Paul warns us both in his own day and today that we all will give an account to the Lord for how we live our lives. God knows our selfishness and our hospitality. He knows our bitterness and unforgiveness as well as our compassion, mercy and willingness to forgive.

God knows the standard we apply to ourselves and the standards we apply to others. God knows how hard we are on ourselves and how hard we are on others. But do we?

Grace is to be the ethic by which we treat each other. Such grace is not to be so lenient that we are never held accountable for our actions, nor is it to be so thin, that it no longer even functions as grace. We are to hold a moderate grace that keeps us looking at each other with encouraging, optimistic eyes, while still having enough vision to see the brokenness and areas open for correction. Such a moderate position is difficult to maintain. Most of us tend toward either extreme of too little grace or too much, the first being controlling and the second being enabling.

But God is not finished with us yet. The journey continues. The Sunday drive of world history has quite a few miles left, in my opinion. We have heard the end of the world stories for this year and next. And we ought to live our lives as fully as we can, as we had little time left, yet as wisely as

we can, as if we had many decades and centuries ahead. Our stewardship goes beyond our lives. We have lost enough loved ones to know that life goes on without them. It is a different life, yet it is our life to live.

The story of God leading his people goes back at least until the Exodus story we read this morning. The Hebrew people could not imagine their lives as anything but slaves. They had much to learn. We have a hard time imagining our world without violence or war, without brokenness or fear. Tastes of heaven are among us in this life, but we must not forget that there is indeed a life beyond this one. The great reunion Jesus talked about in John 14 is more than an event, it is a city, a life without time and without many of the current limitations of space. We will not see the end of sin in this life, but we will see God. We will see Jesus, all who trust him, and give our lives to him.

Meanwhile, we are to be agents of transformation, turning unthinkable horrors into outrageous acts of grace, kindness, hospitality and love. We are to be agents of redemption, recycling the truth and love Jesus left us.

We do not know if there will be even greater horrors than that day ten years ago. But we do know the One who can make us the antidote and the answer in the midst of it.

Let us pray.