

Pastor Gregory Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Holy Cross Sunday, September 11, 2011
Numbers 21:4-9, 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17
The Tenth Anniversary of September 11, 2001

¹⁷For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world *might be saved* through him. (John 3:17, RSV)

As long as many of us New Yorkers can remember anything at all, we will remember September 11, 2001. Even here on the Upper East Side, miles away from the horrors at the World Trade Center, we could look south that morning, see the plumes of smoke drifting upward against the beautiful blue sky, and know what that smoke signified. Among the many sorrowful people who came to our church in those days, was a dazed-looking physician from nearby Lenox Hill Hospital. He told me that he and his colleagues had all rushed to the hospital to be ready to treat the injured, but that as the night wore on and there was no one to minister to, they knew what that meant. They knew that there were few survivors, and their hearts sank.

Oh! how cruel we human beings can be to one another. But also, how noble we human beings can be in the practice of love. How divine we can be in taking up our cross and following Jesus in his manner of life. The work of justice must continue. It is the work of what we Lutherans call “God’s left hand.” It is the divine work of resisting evil and punishing the wrongdoer, and we do well to pray for those who bear the burdens of justice, including soldiers, police, legislators, and courts.

But then there is also you, and me, ordinary folk who simply face our neighbors and a vast world of people. If we do not have responsibilities for the administration of justice, we still have responsibilities of life in Christ. And that is a life that should always incline us toward mercy, love, and forgiveness. We are the ones who can never be excused from what the theologians call “God’s right hand” -- the way our Maker rules his creation through the Gospel of forgiveness in the name of Jesus.

THE MONKS OF TIBHIRINE

As a moving example of taking up the cross and following Jesus, let me tell you about the monks of Tibhirine. In 1996 seven French Trappist monks from their monastery in Tibhirine, Algeria were kidnapped and murdered.¹ In some measure, they could see it coming. It was likely. They had been warned to abandon their monastery, but they had refused. A good shepherd does not leave the flock when he sees the wolf coming, they said.

¹ John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*. (St. Martin’s Griffin: New York, 2002)

These monks ministered to their neighbors, and they were loved for that. Algeria is a Muslim land, and so their neighbors were Muslim, but the monks noted that when Jesus calls upon us to love our neighbors as ourselves², he does make distinctions among those neighbors. Christ does not call us to love the lovable neighbors or the Christian neighbors, but simply to love our neighbors, whosoever that should be:

For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? (Matthew 5:46, KJV)

For these monks, their neighbors were Muslim, so they loved them.

The start of the story goes back to a young soldier named Christian de Chergé. He was serving in Algeria, making the rounds of villages, trying to get to know the lay of the land and the people. He was escorted by a village policeman named Mohammed. Christian was drawn to Mohammed because of how devout he was, and how eager to discuss God and spiritual things. The story continues this way:

The young Frenchman and the older Muslim were lost in conversation during one of their regular rambles in the countryside, when some *fells* (*fellaghas* or rebels) appeared from nowhere... Mohammed put himself between Christian and the rifles aimed at his chest. He insisted that the soldier was a godly man and friend of Muslims. The *fells* withdrew without harming the Frenchman. The next day, Mohammed was found with his throat slit near his home in tiny Aïn Said, where he lived with a wife and ten children.³

A wife suddenly a widow, and ten children suddenly fatherless.

This is an important story because it is a moving illustration of what has been called “the two faces of Islam.”⁴ Islam is an old religion. For much of its history, it has shown two sides, a large side of compassion and openness to others, but also a smaller, intense side of violence and hatred. The Monks of Tibhirine seemed to love them all.

This young soldier, Christian de Chergé, eventually became one of the monks at Tibhirine and then its prior. He was an intellectual and a passionate monk. He wrote essays and was fearless. The monastery there at Tibhirine was defended by no weapons, by no soldiers, but simply by its friendship with its neighbors. The monks had little money, but they gave what they could to the poor. Chiefly, they prayed on behalf of the world and they worked in their substantial garden and sold

² Matthew 22:37-40, KJV: ³⁷Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ³⁸This is the first and great commandment.

³⁹And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

³ *The Monks of Tibhirine*, page 9.

⁴ See, for example, *The Two Faces of Islam* by Stephen Schwartz (Doubleday: New York, 2002)

their produce to their neighbors at as low as price as they could.

As I read the story, the monk I liked best was named Luc. He was a physician. I imagine him sometimes being late to the prayers, but never late to where he was needed. He was kind-hearted and ministered to all, and he was loved by the Muslim neighbors.

In the end, seven of these monks were kidnapped. People prayed for their release, including their Muslim neighbors, but it was not to be. They were beheaded.

Now, you get the feeling about these Trappist monks that they knew this was a possibility. They did not want to be reckless with their lives, and they certainly did not approve of the violence that did them in. But above all, they wanted to give his world some true reflection of Jesus, who took up his cross and continued on his path for love of the world.

The hearts of these Trappist monks could leap ahead to their eventual death, but they did not let it dissuade them. They loved the Muslim neighbors, and would not turn their back on them.

STEPHEN SILLER. TUNNEL TO TOWERS RUN.

And so it was with firemen and emergency medical people rushing to the Twin Towers. They had no guarantee that they would survive their work, and many of them did not, but they did not turn their backs on their work, but pressed ahead in their ways of love.

Our member Natasha Vragel has run in an annual benefit 5K run or walk called the “Tunnel to Towers” run⁵. It is a run in memory of fireman Stephen Siller, who on this awful day ten years ago ran through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel with sixty pounds of gear strapped to his back. He called his wife Sally to tell her he would be late because he had to help those in need. So, he dashed off to try to help. So it is that his wife Sally became a widow and his five children became fatherless. And so it is that one of God’s good sparrows fell to the ground.

THE SPARROWS

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31, NRSV)

What a generous little creature is the sparrow. Sparrows and Snowfinches are primarily seed-eaters. They are gregarious, and sing a sweet little song. They live out their span of life and hardly anyone notices them. They build no monuments, they have no cemeteries, no tiny gravestones. Our big, busy world pays the

⁵ http://www.tunneltotowersrun.org/stephens_legacy.aspx

sparrow little mind. But our Maker does! Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our God. They fall in the forest with no one watching. They fall in the meadow with no one noticing. But our Maker notices. Indeed, he has fallen with them into the grave back on that first Good Friday long ago. Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our God, and neither do you.

Jesus does not always snatch us away from terrors, but he always stands with us in our perils. (St. John Chrysostom, on Matthew 10:23ff)

NATALIE DOUGLAS

In the ebb and flow of emotions today, there are times when we are quiet and sad. When Chris Schulze and David Kiehl rang our church bells rang this morning at 8:46 and 10:28, and churches throughout our city did the same, then we were sad. Perhaps again during coffee hour after this liturgy, when we sit with friends and reminisce about 9/11, we will be quiet and solemn. But soon, Natalie Douglas will sing for us, and then, for that stretch of time, I think we will be happy. Our Gospel Lesson for today includes that beloved verse John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
(John 3:16, KJV)

The Gospel about this only begotten Son is the ultimate and foundational truth of all reality: this only begotten Son who died on the Cross, perished, and fell into the grave, lives again! And he is will able to back up his words that not a sparrow shall fall apart from him. And are you not even more dear to him?

Our hearts are heavy for all those who lost loved ones on this day ten years ago. The tongue cannot tell the story of all the suffering endured then and all the sadness endured these years since then. But also, heavenly things were done that day. People took up their cross and rushed ahead trying to save lives. Other people took up the cross and organized the disaster response. And these are the things that are going to survive all the way into eternity. The lives lost that day rest in the trustworthy hands of Jesus, and for us who remain, the most divine thing we can do is to take up our cross and walk on where so many good people have walked before, trying to do some good in this world and to bring glory to him who deserves the glory, even Jesus Christ our Lord, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.