**17 Pentecost**

**September 11, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Fifteen years ago today the world changed. As we all know, on September 11, 2001 terrorists hijacked four airplanes: two flew into the Twin Towers of the World Trades Center in New York; one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.; and one crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Some of you know people who were in New York City at the time and were caught in the aftermath. Many of us know people directly affected by the collapse of the Twin Towers. All of us felt the impact of this horrific act … emotionally and spiritually. And we still feel the effects today.

Some of you will remember John and Marianne Fitzsimmons who attended St. Cyprian’s a few years ago. He was an ad executive working a couple of blocks from the Twin Towers. He was stuck in New York City overnight on 9/11, and when he finally got home he was still covered in the dust of the collapsed Twin Towers. They moved to Florida to get away from the memories … but the demons followed. It wasn’t until they bought a motorhome and starting wandering around the United States that they began to feel at ease. Today, Fitz and Marianne run a truck stop in New Mexico. They are just a couple of the thousands of people whose lives shifted irreversible that day fifteen years ago.

A question I heard often in the days after 9/11 was, “What does our faith have to say about an event such as this?” It was almost as if the pain that we were all feeling … the fear, confusion, the impotency … was demanding an answer. If only we had an ANSWER it might provide comfort, a greater sense of security, or a feeling of having more control. And if the ANSWER included our faith in God it would only reassure us even more.

In truth, I didn’t have an ANSWER. But when I looked around I found many answers to how the people I knew responded out of their faith. They gathered together in prayer. They shared stories of their losses and their fears. They provided support for the relief workers. Strangers became instant friends. Distinctions of color and class disappeared. Individuals became community around the shared experience. People showed hospitality to each other in profound ways. In their minds there may not have been an ANSWER, but there were certainly answers in the ways these people lived their lives in the days after those events.

Of course, we all know that time has a way of eroding our focus. The world has a way of imposing itself upon us. And the intimacy that was felt in that shared crisis began to disappear. We got back to life as usual. But we can never go back. Once an event like this is witnessed, it cannot be un-witnessed, and it changes our lives forever.

So fifteen years later, with all that life has thrown at us in the meantime including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, several presidential elections, and growing concern of a changing climate … not to speak of personal illnesses, deaths in our families, lost jobs, divorces … so fifteen years later, “What does our faith have to say about events like these?”

I will speak for myself. My faith gives me the strength to live in this world … yesterday, today, and tomorrow. My faith is simple: I know that God loves me; I know that God wants me to live life as full as possible; and I know that God wants a relationship with me, which requires a response from me. There are a number of nuances to that faith … creeds, theology, various forms of expression. But simply put: God loves us, longs to see us thrive, and wants to be in relationship with us.

What does that kind of simple faith have to with 9/11? Or wars? Or climate change? Or illness, loss, or divorce? This kind of faith gives me the courage to open my heart, because God’s heart is open. This kind of faith persuades me to reach out to others as they strive to regain their lives, because God desires a full life for all. And this kind of faith calls me to trust … trust in God knowing that this is God’s creation, not one of our own making. This kind of faith calls me to radical hospitality because that is where I have seen the reality of God alive in this world.

I’m not a great fan of original sin. You have heard me say that basically I do not believe in the doctrine. That doesn’t mean that we don’t sin … that we don’t fully live into that image of God in which we are made. And, when we fail to fully live into that image of God in which we are made … for whatever reason … we become less that what we were made to be. Yes, we all sin from time to time.

Our sins … known and unknown … wound us. When we suffer physical wounds we go to the hospital. When we suffer psychic and spiritual wounds the remedy is hospitality … the radical hospitality that was known by the people of our nation for just a brief moment in time after 9/11 … and the radical hospitality that Jesus is criticized for in today’s reading.

In light of the criticism Jesus received from the Pharisees and scribes I should note that the words “hospital,” “hospitality,” and “hostile” … as in a “hostile” threat … all come from the same root word which means “stranger” or “enemy.” “Hospitality” is that relationship between a host and their guest … or stranger … or, in some cases, enemy. Interestingly, as Jesus is showing radical “hospitality” to those who others deem strangers, he is met with “hostile” criticism from the Pharisees and the scribes.

The fact is that the life of Jesus revealed the heart of God. Luke writes, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." To emphasize this divine welcome … this radical hospitality … God's unconditional acceptance … Jesus tells two parables that repeat the same point … the lost sheep, and the lost coin.

The “sinners” that Jesus welcomed in radical hospitality were those who were ritually unclean in his world. The tax collector who handled money with the Emperor’s image on it … an idol. The prostitute who was ritually unclean because of the laws dealing with feminine hygiene. The persons with skin sores because of the prohibition against open wounds. The blind, or deaf, or lame because they must be sinners otherwise God would not have let this happen to them. Jesus ate with them. He accepted them in radical hospitality.

People felt safe with Jesus. He exuded compassion. Jesus welcomed all the people we ignore and despise. The sexually suspicious. The religiously impure. Ethnic outsiders. Rich tax collectors. The chronically sick and the mentally deranged. Women, widows and children. They all felt safe with Jesus … they knew his compassion.

The only people who didn't feel safe with Jesus were the religious experts who appointed themselves as gatekeepers of God's love. They had good reasons to feel unsafe.

When Jesus welcomed the unwelcome, when he accepted the unacceptable without any preconditions, he angered the religious experts. Luke says that they "muttered."

Whether then or now, there's a bitter irony in how the simple act of accepting a person angers some people. But whereas the gatekeepers get angry, Jesus says twice that there's "joy in heaven" when the lost is found.

Caren shared a poem with me the other day … it is by Virginia Satir:

*I believe the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to be seen by them, heard by them, to be understood and touched by them.*

*The greatest gift I can give is to see, hear, understand and to touch another person. When this is done, I feel contact has been made.*

How is it that some churches today …in the world around us … Episcopal churches, Catholic churches, Presbyterian churches, Baptist churches, and many more … How is it that some churches today, in the name of this same Jesus, refuse to share the holy meal with those deemed by them to be unacceptable? If Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners … those who were “unclean” by the standards of the religious purity system of the day … then surely those gathered in his name … who claim to take seriously what Jesus took seriously … can and should share the meal prepared in his name with all who come to the table.

Interestingly … as many of you well know … I have been criticized by some for inviting all to come and share this holy meal … our Holy Eucharist … when offered in this place. The gatekeepers of the Episcopal Church’s holy law would rather be right by the law than to welcome with radical hospitality those who are wounded who desire to come to the open table. If radical hospitality … the kind of radical hospitality that Jesus exhibited by eating with tax collectors and sinner … and the kind of radical hospitality that many experienced after 9/11 … if this radical hospitality can show us the heart of God, why can’t we open that heart in our churches?

In this week's epistle, Paul uses himself as an example of God's "unlimited patience." God's welcome, says Paul, is "a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance." Remember, throughout the New Testament, Paul describes himself as a former religious zealot who tried to exterminate the early Christian movement.

In this week's epistle to Timothy, as an old man Paul was still haunted by his past. He describes himself as "formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor."

But God welcomed Paul. And his conversion moved him from violent, hostile aggression to indiscriminate love and hospitality. What Paul learned was that you don't need to do anything to receive God's welcome, because there's nothing to do. God welcomes us just like we are and right where we are.

The only thing to do is to accept that we are accepted. In the words of Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don’t know… Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, we experience grace."

What happened on September 11, 2001 changed the world … we will never be the same. But it raised many issues about one’s faith … and how that faith is expressed. The one place that people saw and experienced God was in the radical hospitality that strangers showed each other … in the tragedy of 9/11 race, class and ethnic distinctions and boundaries disappeared … and those who could open their hearts could see God’s heart opened.

*The greatest gift I can give is to see, hear, understand and to touch another person. When this is done, I feel contact has been made.*

Remember that you are a blessed child of God. You were born into blessing. You may stray, but there is always a way back to that blessing. Just accept it.

Amen.