

There has been a lot of remembering of 9/11 going on this past week both on television and in the print media. All of that press triggers some very clear recollections of where we were when we heard the news ten years ago: who we were with and what we heard and felt.

Perhaps some of you read, as I did in the [Telegram & Gazette](#) this past week, that on December 7, 1951—on the tenth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor—there was very little public remembering. No mention at all in *Life Magazine*, for example, where all the news was focused on the Korean War.

Now maybe that says more about how much the world has changed in sixty years and the impact of Cable News on our lives; I'm not sure. Perhaps earlier generations wanted to forget and move on; and maybe we are still grieving and can't yet move on. I'm not really sure which is healthier or if the different responses need to be explained; the point is that as we gather here on this September 11, 2011, the events that unfolded a decade ago are very much on our hearts and minds.

Memories are tricky things. Always, our memories of what happened are filtered through what has since unfolded. So there is never a return to the event—to what happened, even when we can go to the tape. Memories are selective, and are at best about what we think we remember. They can get skewed.

Anyone who has ever been at a family gathering and discussed an important event, something that happened in that family ten or twenty or thirty years ago, knows what I am talking about and how this works. No one has access anymore to the event itself. So as each person tells her story, there are likely to be comments like, “that isn't at all what happened!” So it is important for us to try to be reflective and open and self-aware by doing the best we can to remember rightly. This is not a terribly controversial or profound insight, but I think it is worth saying it out loud from time to time, especially on a day like this.

If we aren't careful, memories can re-traumatize us and it would probably be better to forget than to do that. As a nation, I do think we were traumatized in those weeks of September 2001 as we watched those images of the towers coming down over and over and over again.

Whatever our own memories may be, first and foremost it seems appropriate to me that we remember those who died ten years ago at Ground Zero, at the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania. I hope we will remember their families for whom this weekend must still be so raw. You never completely get over such loss. We also remember the first responders, many of whom are now dealing with serious health issues, and the men and women of our Armed Forces who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the subsequent “War on Terror.” We should also remember the countless civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq, mindful that there is no bomb smart enough to protect innocent men and women and children from the ravages of modern warfare. As we remember all the saints who “from their labors rest” we are called back to the heart of our faith: for we are a people who even at the grave dare to make our Easter song: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia*.

I remember Hathy and I driving up north a week or two after 9/11—I am no longer certain if it was to New Hampshire or Vermont. We saw a father and son who looked to be of Middle Eastern descent, sitting by the side of the road next to an enormous American flag and waving to the cars that were passing by. It seemed to us as if they wanted to be very clear that they were a part of “us” and not a part of “them;” that they, too, were grieving and that they, too, loved this country. I didn’t always agree with President Bush in the eight years he was in the Oval Office. But I thought he was steadfast, and correct, when he made a very clear distinction between the vast majority of faithful Muslims and a few radical terrorists who committed an atrocity in the name of religion.

The President was clear, but as you may recall, the incidents of violence and hate crimes against Arab Americans and mosques escalated in the months after 9/11. Those incidents were based in fear and ignorance, and the gospel has something to say about both. I thought it was important for the Church to speak clearly then and now; to bring light where there is darkness and to allow love to cast out fear.

We had a brand new youth minister at St. Francis in September 2001, Lori Churchill. I remember that Lori brought in a Muslim friend to talk with our youth and their parents. I made a promise to myself and to God to learn more about Islam, and I began to live into that by taking a class at Georgetown University which brought imams and pastors together to read and discuss texts from both *The Holy Bible* and *The Holy Qur’an*. I attended The Trinity Institute in New York City, at Ground Zero, when they offered a program on Christian-Jewish-Muslim relationships. A decade later, we’ve made it part of our Confirmation program to engage our Islamic neighbors on Mountain Road at their mosque, to learn and to grow and to live more faithfully into the promises that we made at Baptism “to respect the dignity of every person” and “to strive for justice and peace among all people.” I am a long way from being an expert on any of this, but I’m committed to staying engaged in the conversation.

In one of the remembrances I saw this past week, a piece on CBS’ ["The Early Show"](#) caught my eye: a story about a Christian congregation outside of Memphis, Tennessee that had a mosque built right across the street from them. Instead of reacting in fear and ignorance, that congregation put up a sign that said “welcome neighbors.” The pastor challenged his congregation and told them that in his view Jesus really did mean it when he commanded his followers to “love your neighbor.” He lost more than twenty members of his congregation for taking that stand.

But then they went further. As the mosque was being built, that Christian congregation opened their doors and invited their Muslim neighbors in to use their space for prayers during Ramadan. Today those two congregations have a picnic together on Labor Day weekend and they celebrate Thanksgiving together and they support various outreach projects to help the poor and downtrodden in their community. The kicker for me came at the end of the story, as the imam and the pastor were standing together and the pastor revealed that the imam also happens to be

his cardiologist. This, of course, is the world we live in and it is the sort of story that makes me proud to be both a Christian and an American (in that order.)

I remember how full this church was on the weekend after 9/11. People who had no church affiliation, people I'd never met before (or have seen since) came here. I think they were looking for a word of comfort and hope, or maybe just a place to be with other confused people. The uptick in church attendance didn't last long here or anywhere else as far as I can tell, but it served as a reminder to me that in a crisis, people really do still look to the Church for guidance, if not answers, and for a place to pray even when they aren't sure whether or not they believe in God or are ready to commit their lives to the Way of Jesus. For me this tenth anniversary reminds me that we really do have a calling to be the Church in good times and in hard times—that we have a mission. Or more accurately, God has a mission, and asks the Church to be a part of that work by continuing to proclaim the good news.

There are plenty of other places this weekend where we can focus on pride in nation, and that has its place. But here, I believe, we are called to focus on our vocation as Easter people and on our mission to be light that shines in the darkness. We come here not only to remember what happened, but to proclaim the gospel in the midst of what happened, so that when we leave this place today we can be signs of new life for the sake of this broken world. We find in Holy Scripture a Word of the Lord that guides us along that pathway.

In today's Old Testament reading, we heard the familiar narrative about the Exodus event—a story that suggests that God liberated a bunch of slaves by taking sides in a battle between a group of Jews who were powerless at the time, and the Egyptian army which was one of the most powerful in the world. God stands with the powerless against the powerful; that is what the Exodus narrative claims. Even so, such stories disturb us because Egyptian soldiers died on that day as they were “hurled into the Red Sea.” We do well to remember that this also disturbed the rabbis throughout the centuries as well, and many Passover seders build in a liturgical way of remembering this, suggesting that God did not do this with glee but rather wept when those Egyptians died, because they, too, were God's children. I think that there is much for us to learn from that practice as we continue to find our way forward.

Today's Gospel reading is one of the most challenging in all of Scripture, at least to live. It's not that hard to understand. Forgiveness takes us to the heart of the Christian faith. We are all sinners; all of us fall short of the glory of God. And yet by grace, we have been forgiven. This weekend our minds are on the events of September 11. But next month marks another anniversary, the fifth anniversary of the terrible shootings at the West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania on October 2, 2006, where Charles Carl Roberts IV shot ten school girls, killing five of them. As you may recall, the Amish community made national headlines when they sought to forgive that murderer and offered reconciliation to his family. Some of the Amish community attended the calling hours of Roberts and extended a hand to his wife and mother. They bore witness to the power of forgiveness to heal and in so doing to reveal

a way forward. They tore down that old schoolhouse and built a new one called “New Hope School.” (The story is told by John L. Ruth in [Forgiveness: A Legacy of the West Nickel Mines Amish School](#).) For me, that is a very powerful witness to the Gospel.

As we remember the events of ten years ago, I can think of no better prayer for us to be praying—not only with our lips, but with our lives—than that of our patron, St. Francis.

- In a world bent toward war, may God continue to use us as instruments of peace;
- In a world where there is so much violence and hatred, may we keep sowing seeds of love;
- In a world where there is so much injury and it is tempting to nurse our grievances, may we offer pardon and an outstretched hand as ministers of reconciliation...

*...until sadness leads us all to joy, and despair gives way to the new hope of abundant life in Jesus Christ.*

If this day is only about remembering the past, then we are destined to remain stuck there in a kind of vicious circle. We are called, as an Easter people, to find our way toward the dawn of a new day: to the new hope and the new life that Christ offers to us and the world on that Sunday morning at the empty tomb. From that place, we begin to move through pain and suffering and loss to forgiveness and healing and reconciliation. *Even at the grave, we dare to keep making our song...alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*