

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Today is 9-11. It is impossible to forget how powerful this date is. Last year this date fell on a Saturday and we had a very sweet...and small...commemorative service here that morning with just four of us. It was the 20th anniversary of one of the most horrendous attacks that has ever struck the United States and it seemed appropriate that we should include God in some sort of ceremony that remembered and marked the occasion. Even twenty years later it was hard to accept that it had truly happened. But it did happen and in some ways it changed America altogether, but perhaps only temporarily, not permanently.

Do you remember what our corporate life was like in the aftermath of losing the twin towers and so many precious people with it? It was a rather miraculous change among us. Do you remember that we paid so much more attention to each other? People readily helped one another out. People spoke to each other more often. People checked up on each other to be sure everyone was OK. We had suddenly been made aware of how precious life itself is and how easily someone could be taken from us. All sorts of aspects of healthy community began to spring up. We were no longer enemies of one another. We were no longer on opposite sides of the political fence. We were on the *same* side! We were no longer marginalized because we were poor. People began to talk to one another...and to people they might never have talked to before. Suddenly people began to show care for one another and particularly for those they would have passed right by without acknowledgement before the twin towers fell.

Do you remember how we felt after 911? We were suddenly vulnerable in a way that we had never really considered possible. We tend to feel 'safe' in our isolated little corner of the world. We have oceans on both sides of us and they have always seemed like such protections for us. It's unlikely that Canada or Mexico would ever invade us. No other country in our hemisphere would dare attack us. But we were attacked on our own soil nevertheless and those who attacked us chose the most opulent symbol of our culture to destroy...the twin towers in New York City...the most conspicuous symbol of capitalism and American excess that we had. Suddenly we were vulnerable. Suddenly it was time to rethink our place in the world. And suddenly we began to look at ourselves in a different way. And we began to question our priorities...at least for a little while.

In the wake of the 911 attack on the United States, we began to pay more attention to each other. It was no longer a matter of Republicans or Democrats. It was not about well-educated people and uneducated people. It wasn't about fine clothes and fancy cars or subway riders. For a brief period of time we were all together. We were experiencing the same sense of loss and for the same reason. We were marooned in what seemed to be a little life raft and we paid close attention to one another...not out of fear of each other, but out of genuine concern for one another. For a few weeks and a few months we truly were a United people the way so many of us had always hoped we would be. We were looking out for one another and so many of us noticed the change in attitude in our own country. And many of us talked about wanting to keep it that way forever. People seemed to be kinder to one another; more generous with their time and with their talents. Our neighbors really did become real neighbors and so many of us remarked on how wonderful it was. We hoped we could keep it up

because we felt so connected to one another. In so many ways, when those twin towers fell, we found ourselves and each other. But like so many other dreams of a better society, this genuine care for one another eventually faded away and each of us fell into old habits that we had already decided didn't work too well for us. We retreated back inside our houses and hid ourselves in old routines and ways of thinking.

And it didn't take long for us to be lost once again. Slowly each of us began to retreat inside our houses or to places that were always very familiar but not necessarily stimulating or enriching. Gradually, we fell back into old habits and familiar patterns. It's easier that way. And we mourned a bit about the fact that we realized we had once again lost our sense of community and our desire to be connected to one another. Instead of reaching out to care for one another, our sense of vulnerability prompted us to be suspicious and wary of anyone who didn't look like us or dress like us or talk like us or live like us. We drifted back into our silos afraid to reach out to others who were different. It seemed that we weren't able to recreate that sense of unity and caring for one another that happened to us in the immediate aftermath of 911. We were too frightened. And we couldn't do it by ourselves.

Our gospel lesson this morning is about the Good Shepherd finding the lost...and surely many of us feel like the 'lost' much of the time...regardless of our bank account. The Good Shepherd leaves the flock to go and look for the one who has strayed and lost its way. We all know what it's like to lose someone or something that we value. We are desperate to find it and we won't stop searching until we do. God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock and like the

woman who accounts for every silver coin in her purse. God treasures every child in the family. When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. We know that God is love. Loving is God's nature and love searches tirelessly until what is lost has been found because the one who is lost may not be able to find the way back home alone. Just like the silver coin that is an inanimate object. It can't call out or shine brightly to bring attention to itself. Sometimes neither can we. And we all know about the generous heart of the father of the prodigal son. His son never gets a chance to use the apology that he has practiced because his father is way ahead of him. His father has been watching and waiting for him since he left. His father has already forgiven him before the son reaches the front door. That's what God is like and, yet, we seem to be reluctant to approach God. Somehow we don't believe in the gracious forgiveness of God any more than the prodigal son believed in the gracious forgiveness of his father.

We all know how difficult it is to change. We know how difficult it is to take responsibility for our own words and our own actions. We are filled with regret and misgivings. We feel unworthy. But at the same time, we know how lovely it was to have a sense of community and to feel like we were connected to others in the wake of 911. It would be so wonderful if we could generate that feeling again without the massive death and destruction of another 911.

What do you think it would take for us to come to value you one another in that way again? What do you think it would take for us to build a sense of community right where we are? What would we have to give up? What would we have to share? What would we have to do differently? What would we have to offer to others that has nothing to do with our material 'things.'? That experience of 911

held so many good lessons for us in addition to an enormous amount of hurt and pain. Can we have one without the other? What sort of sense of self-righteousness would we need to examine and give up in order to build that kind of community right where we are?

We know that God is waiting for us with open arms and we also know that God will not force us to build community. God will not force us to set old habits away. And God will not force us to build relationships with our neighbors. God will take us by the hand if we ask for it. God will guide us along the way if we want. God will embrace us with all joy if we want to live our lives in a new way...in the way that God has designed for us to live with one another...with respect and caring and acceptance. What happened to us after 911 wasn't a fluke. It's what happens when the current assumptions about what works and what doesn't work become painfully obvious. These are the things that are discovered in the wake of crisis. When we are in emergency mode we find ourselves behaving in different ways...in ways that God has laid out for us from the beginning of time. If we only have the courage and the will to step out into the unknown world that God has laid out for us. If only we could trust God "just this much." We might find that God does, in fact, have a better idea for us...a better and more satisfying way of living our lives. When we step out of the picture we have an opportunity to step into God's dream for us.

Not my will God, but Thy will.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.