“***United***” by Jenny Williams. The First Church, Sep. 5, 2021

In my sermon today, I’d like to revisit the awful events that occurred twenty years ago, on September 11th, 2001. A day that will live on in history. Over three thousand men, women, and children were killed by terrorists that were so undone by Jihad. It was their mission that day to kill as many Americans as they could. And it became our mission to never let it happen again.

I would venture a guess that we all remember where we were when it happened. We’ll always remember, like when Kennedy was shot and when the Challenger exploded. I myself was in my car on the way to work, and they were interviewing people on WBZ who had seen the first plane go into the towers. I remember listening in horror to them when the second plane went in. It was pure panic. September 11th used to be a good day. It was my parent’s wedding anniversary. In 2001, they would have been married 53 years. And even though my mom had died in 1992, I still said happy anniversary to my dad. So, it was good for me. But then September 11th happened. And though I still remember my parent’s anniversary, that date will be filled with sadness from now on.

I remember that I became quite a 9/11 junkie after that day. I’m sure a lot of us did. I watched every TV show and read every book. I couldn’t get enough of it. And I think I’m still the same way twenty years later. One of the best books I read was “102 Minutes”. It was the stories of survivors in the towers and how they got out. Of course, they saw many people along the way who wouldn’t. And of all of those, Alta knew seven of them. She was friends with two – Neilie Casey and Lisa Fenn. They were on Flight 11 that crashed into the North Tower – seven coworkers going on a business trip to California for TJX. I’d like to share a couple of texts from Alta if I could. I had asked her what flight they were on. Her response was: “Flight 11. I still have some of the literature from their memorial service. Neilie’s daughter was 9 months old. I’m sure she’s in college now. Lisa had 3 kids, if I remember right. It was their first day of school and she was on the phone with her husband as the plane was taking off, he told her to hang up and turn it off before she got in trouble.” How sad is that? Then Alta sent me a picture of Neilie and her daughter saying, “Here is a photo of Neilie and her baby Riley. Neilie had thick red hair, she was beautiful inside and out…She was so sweet, so excited to be a new mom. That was her first business trip since returning from maternity leave.” Again, how sad is that? And these are only two stories. There are so many sad stories because of this event.

I’d like to also mention a documentary I watched this week. It was called 9/11 One Day in America. If you get the chance, try and watch it. It’s on National Geographic channel. It too is about survivors and is very powerful. The stories are all sad, because even if someone got out, there were still their friends and relatives that didn’t make it. One story is about a man named Clifford, who was at the Marriot for a meeting. He was early so he walked around the lobby of the North Tower. He went back to the Marriot, where he was when the first plane hit, so he went back over to see what happened. He came across a woman who was in the lobby waiting for the elevator to go up to work. When the elevators opened all the jet fuel that was on fire came out, killing many instantly. This woman, Jennieann Muffeo, was badly burned. Clifford tried to help her and eventually got her into an ambulance. I assumed she lived, but later found out that she had died from her injuries. And then when Clifford got home, he got a call from his brother-in-law that his sister and niece had also been on Flight 175. Another sad, sad story.

So, if we put aside our sad stories for a minute, and focus on something good, we can actually shift to politics. I know, right? George W. Bush was president at the time, and after the initial horror set in, he was just absolutely great in uniting this country. This may be surprising to some of you, but I just love, love, love George Bush. I do not love other republican presidents equally though, but that’s another story for another day. And I remember when Martha called me at work that Tuesday morning and asked me how my day was, I told her, you haven’t seen the news yet right? We have a terrorist attack going on in New York City. To that she replied “That GD George Bush!” She later apologized because she knew I liked him. He may not have done a lot in his 4 years, but he certainly did unite this country, for a little while, a least. Seeing him with that crowd of first responders and citizens in New York City a few days later just gave me a sense of patriotism that I haven’t experienced before. I was so proud to be an American. I think we all were. We were united. We were one country. We were never going to forget. We were never going to let Al Qaeda get us again. But life went on. We were still pretty united as the first anniversary approached. But slowly we drifted away from our unity. Other awful things happened and we forgot about September 11th. Well, maybe not completely, but it did happen. I would tell everyone to visit the 9/11 Museum in New York, if you get the chance. It was awesome, but really, really sad. I took pictures of everything, but the most poignant one for me was of a demolished set of stairs. It was heavily damaged, but you could tell it was a stairway. Why did it mean so much to me? It was a narrow staircase, but still thousands of people were able to escape, even with firefighters going up when they were going down. To know that people were standing right there, hopefully getting out before the building collapsed was just mind blowing to me. And if you didn’t get out using those stairs, you probably didn’t make it. They say only 18 people were rescued after the collapse. And to think of all the rescuers who were going up and never came down. Wow!

So, we really need to unite this country once more. We got pretty close at the start of the pandemic. Now that’s dwindled too and we are right back where we started. Home grown terrorism, racial tensions, people shooting people for any reason they want. And we are letting it happen. You know, I see Carol Ashton pretty much every Tuesday at School on Wheels, where we volunteer. I told her that I was doing the sermon this week, and she asked me what was it about. I told her that it was about September 11 and how united we were after it happened and how we are not anymore. And I didn’t want to sound like I was yelling about it and get people mad. When I do a sermon, I want to lift up, not push down. I think we can learn something from every sermon. So, then Carol said something great – how can we be united together if we are not united with Christ? Whoa! That is so true.

In our Psalm today, we hear how it expresses the [hope](https://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/library/article/id/735/the-elements-of-motivation-part-three-hope.htm) of all Christians. What a great thing it would be if all the people could live together harmoniously! What things we could accomplish! And it concludes – For there the Lord bestows his blessing; even life forevermore. That’s what we get when we live in unity. It is also written in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Without being united with Christ and living with God we can’t be united as a people. We need to live with God in our heart and live our entire life through him. I say this as part of my prayer every day “God help me to do your will and not my own. I know that with you I am everything and without you I am nothing”. And I know that for me at least, it is very true. I hope it is for you as well. I give it up to God if I have a problem and it usually works out. I don’t need to stress out about it. God will never give you more than you can handle. I think if we get right with God, we can get right with our own country and even the world. We can be kind to one another, which is my number one mantra. Just be kind. Even more basic, start with a smile. It’s amazing how it can brighten up someone’s day. If we start there everything else will fall into place. And never, ever forget what happened twenty years ago next Saturday. I know I won’t. Amen.