

September 12, 2021
Lectionary 24, Year B
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 8:27-38
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Finding Life

The 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks was a Sunday. In the weeks leading up to it, the Brookfield clergy group that I was a part of gave some thought to how we could observe that anniversary as a group. In that town, it was unusual for people to come to afternoon or evening ecumenical services, so we knew that trying to plan some kind of Sunday afternoon service would probably be unsuccessful. So, what we decided to do, was to ring our church bells throughout the morning at all of the times when the events of September 11th took place, the crashing of the planes, and the falling of the buildings.

At Prince of Peace, my church at the time, after the bells rang, I also arranged for people to stand up and offer a prayer for things related to the September 11th events and their aftermath.

Normally, here at Emmanuel, if we hadn't had to delay things because of the ongoing pandemic, this would be what I would call our kickoff Sunday, the Sunday when we would be returning to two in-person Sunday morning worship services and Sunday School.

It was the same at Prince of Peace. On the Sunday after Labor Day, we would return to our two worship services and we would have our Sunday School Kick-Off which included a big pot-luck breakfast.

Our worship services at Prince of Peace were at 8:15 and 11:00, Sunday School was at 9:30, and our children's choir, which was beginning its new season that Sunday too, rehearsed at 10:30.

Which mean that at 8:46, the time when the North Tower was struck, we were in the middle of a worship service. I think I was preaching. And the bells rang, at our church and all over town, and we stopped and prayed.

Let us pray. Ever-present God, we pray for those who mourn and for those who wonder, "O God, where were you?" We pray for those for whom this day reopens wounds that might never fully heal. We pray for ourselves because we are afraid. The world changed twenty years ago, it became place of new fears and violence brought near and spread afar. We still struggle to be faithful in this strange new world. Help and guide your people, in the face of all dangers and fears, by the power of your guiding Spirit to know and to desire your will, and give us the strength to do it. We ask this in the name of Jesus our rock. Amen.

At 9:03, the time when the south tower was struck, we were having communion. And the bells rang, and we stopped what we were doing and prayed.

Let us pray. Righteous God, guard brave women and men who risk themselves in battle for our country. Defend them day by day with your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be. Give them

compassion for their enemies. Keep them from hate that hardens. When they must be at war, let them live for peace. Encourage them as they encourage one another. Comfort loved ones who await their return. Give them patience, wisdom, and hope in these uncertain times, and increase their faith and assurance in your love. Be with those who have been injured in body, mind, or spirit in this nation's wars and grant them help, support, and healing. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the prince of peace. Amen

At 9:37, the time when the Pentagon was struck, the bells rang, interrupting the announcements that I was making about the beginning of the new Sunday School year, and we stopped and we prayed.

Let us pray. Lord God, of our ancestors and of all future generations, we pray for your blessing on the children of our world. We pray for the grief of the children who lost parents, grandparents, and other loved ones on September 11, 2001. We pray for their continued healing. We pray for the children whose homes have been destroyed, who have become refugees, who have lost all order and stability in their lives in the wars that followed the September 11th attacks. We pray for children whose parents do not have the resources or the will to protect them. We pray for the children in our own lives and around the world, who inherit a world that is neither as safe nor as peaceful as we would have it be. Give us the courage, the compassion, and the wisdom, to reflect your heart of love for children, so that, by your power, we can give them a world where children are nurtured, cherished, protected, and

guided. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who called the children to himself and blessed them. Amen.

At 9:59, the time when the south tower fell, we were eating our breakfast and getting ready to move through the church blessing the Sunday School classrooms. The bells rang and we stopped and prayed.

God of healing, we pray for those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder because of the events of September 11th, those who lived through the attacks, those who witnessed the attacks and those who have fought in wars that started as a result of the attacks. We pray for all whose peace was shattered on that day or because of that day. We pray for those who have turned to alcohol and drugs to deal with the horrors of what that they experienced on September 11th.

We pray for their families, for their friends, for their faith communities, and for others in their lives, that they may find ways to show support and understanding and be agents of healing. Restore to the people who are suffering the peace, joy, and freedom that has been taken away from them by acts of terror and violence. We ask this in the name of Christ, our healer. Amen

At 10:03, the time when flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, we were still eating, but the bells rang, and again, we stopped and prayed.

Let us pray. God of earth and air, water and fire, height and depth, we pray for those who work in danger, who rush in to bring hope and help

and comfort when others flee to safety, whose mission is to seek and save, serve and protect, and whose presence embodies the protection of the Good Shepherd. Give them caution and concern for one another, so that in safety they may do what must be done, under your watchful eye. Support them in their courage and dedication that they may continue to save lives, ease pain, and mend the torn fabric of lives and social order. We remember before you today, those brave rescue workers, who sacrificed their lives, their health, and their peace, in order to rescue others on September 11th. We thank you for their example and pray that we may be inspired with such a love of others and such a sense of duty. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

At 10:28, when the north tower fell, we were finished with our Sunday School blessing, we were back in our fellowship hall, just sending the children who were in the children's choir to the music room for their choir practice. And the bells rang and we stopped and prayed.

Let us pray. God of all nations and races, we hear in the words of Jesus, the call to love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors. The ability to love where we have been deeply wronged comes only from you and so it is with trust in your power in our lives that we pray for our enemies, for the ones for whom we would rather not pray and for ourselves. Lead us from prejudice to truth; deliver us from hatred and revenge; give us courage to overcome our fears and build bridges, that we may stand before you reconciled through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I know that all of us who were alive on that day and old enough to remember, do remember the details of that day. We remember what we were doing, whatever normal, Tuesday morning things we were doing when we first heard about what was going on, in New York City, and then in Arlington Virginia, and then in New York City again, and then in Pennsylvania, and finally, horrifically, again in New York City.

Maybe some of us missed the first few events of the day, but by the time the final tower fell, less than two hours after the first plane hit the north tower, many of us were huddled by our TVs or listening to our radios, some of us alone, some of us were gathered with co-workers or teachers or students, or other family members, or even strangers.

And we all watched and listened and anyone who watched and listened on that day, had to know that nothing could ever be the same again.

But in the midst of the nightmare inducing horror of that day, over and over again, we heard stories of people who helped other people.

We heard stories about people who rescued co-workers, friends, and strangers, some of them giving up their own chances of survival in order to make sure someone else lived.

We heard stories about first responders who ran into the burning, collapsing buildings, to try to save as many lives as they could.

And, of course, we heard stories about the passengers and crew of Flight 93, who, upon learning, in whispered phone conversations with family members and 911 operators, that their plane would be used by the terrorists as another bomb, intended to take out another target, likely the Capitol building or the White House in Washington D.C., decided to take matters into their own hands, not to save themselves, but to save those who their plane

would destroy. They attacked their hijackers, and crashed the plane themselves, in a field, where the only lives that would be lost would be their own.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them,

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

Jesus said those words, after Peter had rebuked him for telling his disciples where his ministry was heading. Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to give up his life for the sake of his mission, to bring life, to bring salvation to the people, to all people. He told them that he would die for the sake of the world.

And to Peter, that sounded like a horrible idea, a horrible thought, a horrible statement. He didn't need Jesus dead, he needed Jesus alive; alive and with him. Jesus words were not what he was expecting, were not what he wanted to hear.

And he told him so. Peter rebuked Jesus.

Dying was not what the messiah was supposed to do. The messiah was supposed to be a hero, a victorious hero, who would perhaps lead an army or call down avenging angels who would save them from the Romans. Suffering and dying was not on Peter's agenda for Jesus. Sacrifice was not the plan.

But Peter's agenda for Jesus was not Jesus' agenda for himself. Jesus had not come to save the Jewish people from the Roman Empire or to set the

land of Israel free. Jesus had come to save all people and the whole world from the power of sin. He had come to set all people free from death. He had come to stand against sin and evil, not just the sin and evil of one empire, but against the sin and evil of them all, all expressions of human oppression and exploitation of other people and of the earth itself.

And in order to do that, to bring the salvation he had come to bring, in order to defeat the powers he had come to defeat, Jesus had to put himself into the power of sin and evil, and he had to die, so that he could prove, once and for all, that life was stronger than death and that God's love was more powerful than the power of sin.

And he invited anyone who wanted to follow him to take the same path. To stand against the powers of sin and evil, even when it seemed clear that they would win, and to give of themselves for the sake of love, for the sake of life, for the sake of good news, for the sake of others.

We saw that on 9/11. People giving up their lives for others. Of course, the people who died on 9/11, were made up of many races and languages and religions, and some of no religion at all. All of them died because they were victims of the worst terrorist attack this country has ever seen.

But some lived because someone else took their place, gave up their life for them, rescued them and ran back in to rescue someone else, let them pass them on the steps, crashed a plane, to save hundreds, perhaps thousands. And some of them died because they tried to save, to rescue, to help others, in the midst of a disaster.

And on that day of horror, which is embedded in our memories, its images and feelings imprinted on our minds, we saw the worst and the best

of humanity and we knew that we had been changed, that nothing could ever be the same again.

In so many heart-breaking ways, we were right. Things have not been the same since. Two wars have been waged, people have experienced life altering and life ending illnesses as a result of the things that they were exposed to at Ground Zero, and certainly people have experienced as a result of the events of that day, many mental health issues that have upended their lives.

But we still seem to be struggling to figure out how to recapture something that we saw on that day, the thing that so many of us held onto, the thing that gave us hope, rising from the smoke and ashes of death. The thing that helped us see, not only the worst of humanity on that day of horrors, but the best.

The thing that Jesus promised. That those who lose their lives for the sake of others, for the sake of good news, for the sake of life and hope and healing and love, will save it. In other words that people who give of themselves for the sake of those in need, in big ways, but also in small ways, will find in that giving, life and hope and community and healing. As Christians we also believe that in that self-giving, in that generosity, that takes up the cross and follows Jesus in his way of sacrifice, we find Jesus too, with us, guiding us, giving us the strength and power that we need to give ourselves to our neighbors.

We are living through our own time of crisis, and a calamity that has lasted, not less than two hours, but months turned into more than a year. And, as I've shared with you many times, that I am tired. And I'm sure that many of you are too. Tired of things not being normal, tired of making

decisions about what's safe and what's not, tired of six feet of separation, even, if I'm honest, tired of wearing masks, and washing masks, and losing masks and finding masks, and buying new masks.

But mostly I'm tired of the noise of the people who have decided that they don't need to respond to this time of crisis at all. People who are unwilling to make the sacrifices, which, in the grand scheme of things seem to be rather small, to save the live of others, and even their own lives.

It seems that we are living in yet another time, when we are seeing the worst of humanity.

But if we look around, we are also seeing some of the best. We're seeing people learning to do things in new ways to keep things going. We're seeing people wearing masks, as a sign of love and care for their community. We've seen people lining up to get vaccinated, for their own sake and for the sake of the world. We've seen people reaching out to those who are sick and alone. We're seeing, everyday, health care workers working tirelessly to save lives, and to bring comfort and community to the sick and dying.

Perhaps in the midst of this crisis, we can continue to have hope, that someday we, that someday all of us, will find our lives, not in living for ourselves, not in clinging to our own imagined well-being at the expense of others, but in giving our lives, in love and service to our neighbors and find that in that giving, we gain life, and gain it abundantly. Amen.