

## **DAYS OF INFAMY**

Every generation has a historical event for which almost every individual can remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news:

- That Pearl Harbor had been bombed by the Japanese.
- That President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas.
- That the space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after takeoff from Cape Canaveral.

But 10 years ago, it wasn't so much a moment as it was a growing horror of minutes as events transpired that morning. When the first plane hit one of the Twin Towers, many of us thought how could a pilot have made such a terrible error. But then as we curiously watched the news, we saw a second plane hit the second tower. And some of us dismissed that as a suspicious coincidence until a half hour later when a third plane hit the Pentagon.

Maybe the defining moment of that day was when that third plane hit. Suddenly, no one considered what was happening as a freak accident or a coincidence. As Americans, we knew we were under attack. And we worried where we would be hit next.

And here we are, 10 years later still concerned with that question: Where will we be hit next? New York City and Washington D.C. are on high security today, concerned with rumors of planned attacks on this terrible anniversary date. And every day for 10 years, boarding an airplane has been more than just a quick stop at security. Other than heightened security, have we learned anything from that terrible attack 10 years ago?

I know immediately after the attack, there was a surge in church attendance nationwide as people hoped they could find some answers from God. On the other hand, some family members of pilots, flight attendants and passengers turned from their faith, because they could not fathom how a God of love could allow such a calamity to take place without stopping it.

I believe the God who existed before 9/11 is the same God who exists today, and He is a God of infinite love, compassion and peace. It's just that God created us humans with the free will to choose to do good or to do evil, and many don't always choose on the side of love, compassion and peace.

I believe the God we worship today was on board of those four planes. On the first three, God was weeping along with those bewildered people as their lives were ended in such an evil act of horror and pain – especially since the perpetrators claimed it was in God's name that they did what they did.

And on the fourth plane, God was with the passengers giving them the incredible courage to be heroes. Many of us on 9/11 couldn't fathom what it initially meant when 20 minutes after a plane hit the Pentagon, a fourth plane crashed in the middle of a field in Shanksville, Penn. It was only later that we heard that passengers calling loved ones on their cell phones heard about the other three crashes. They realized their pilots were not going to seek ransom for the passengers, but rather intended to use the plane as a battering ram.

And rather than sit back and allow that to happen, the passengers prayed the Lord's Prayer, and then stormed the cockpit so that the resulting crash of United Flight #93 did not take out any more innocent lives, nor did it destroy the White House or the U.S. Capitol.

I believe the God we worshiped before 9/11 still calls to us 10 years later to be the people He created us to be: a people of grace and forgiveness, not only as individuals but as a nation.

Hear again the words of Matthew 18:21-35. "Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

When Peter includes this answer, he thought he was being generous. The rabbis taught that when someone asks for forgiveness, we are obligated to pardon someone three times. Peter

doubles that and adds one to suggest 7 times. Seven is a perfect number to the Jews because God created the world in 7 days. So to Peter, that seemed the perfect answer.

But Jesus is not satisfied with seven. He says to Peter, “Not seven times, but I tell you 77 times.” And in fact, the translators are not in agreement with that number. There are many who instead translate Jesus’ answer to say we are to forgive 70 times 7, which would be 490 times – a very extravagant number to anyone who has been wronged 490 times by another.

But in fact, whether Jesus was saying 77 times or 70 times 7 times, what he meant was not a measurable number. Our forgiveness should go beyond a number we can easily count.

Because what Jesus tells us is our forgiveness should be limitless. We are not to be counting the times we forgive a person, so that when we reach 77 or even 490, we can throw up our hands and say, “Sorry! You have just exhausted my forgiveness. You have not officially passed into the unforgiveable category.”

No, Jesus was saying we should forgive anyone who asks for two reasons. One, the act of mercy could cause a person to reconsider their cruelty and seek to change their behavior because they’ve been given a second chance. And second, each time we forgive someone, it should remind us of how much God has forgiven us.

Now, there are those who may have to go back and check out my sermon on August 14 when I talked about forgiveness. Forgiveness is different from reconciliation, and God’s definition of love does not mean we are punching bags or doormats to those who would take advantage of us. That’s not forgiveness is about.

Forgiveness is a gift we give to ourselves. By forgiving, we no longer allow the hurt done to us to continue to cause pain, suffering or anger within us. We are able to let go and move on

with our lives – certainly remembering what happened to us, but putting it in the rearview mirror instead of through the front windshield. We need to be able to move ahead with our lives.

And we need to bring with us the lessons learned. On the evening of 9/11, I remember Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, all joined together singing *God Bless America*. That moment of infamy broke down all of our previous divisions, because in that moment we were all united as Americans.

And even more, a few days later, there was the memorial service in which Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders all shared in the worship service, all praising God in our own languages and words, and all denouncing the injustice of the terrorists.

What stood out the most to me at that service was when Billy Graham came forward to preach. He'd been diagnosed with Parkinson's some years before, and he had to lean on the arm of another man as he made his way up the steps to the pulpit. And having had a grandfather who suffered from Parkinson's, I wondered whether Dr. Graham would be able to get his point across or whether his voice would be made muddy by his disease.

But as soon as he reached the podium, he looked up, and began speaking in that crystal voice – about forgiveness. A word many didn't want to hear at that moment, but a word God needed us to hear and remember, then and now.

Because it's not as important that we have days of infamy, because we will; what is important is to seek God's definition of how we live as people who go through days of infamy.

I want to share with us now our prayer concerns and praises. But instead of my offering a prayer today, I would invite you to turn to the Litany for the Church and the World found on the back of the yellow insert in our bulletins, and we will pray it together as a special remembrance of this anniversary.