

Fr Jerry's 9/11 Homily

This is a day of remembrance. On the way to visit someone in the hospital earlier this week, I turned on the car radio to listen as Suzanne McCabe was reading an essay about her brother Mike who died in the attack on the World Trade Towers on 9/11. As I listened I had to pull off to the side of the road and I wept. I wept tears of sorrow for Suzanne's family and tears of gratitude for my own family.

I've told the story a few times in the last ten years that on 9.11.2001, my sister-in-law, Kimberly Ragan should have been at a meeting for her company in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. At the time Kim was pregnant with my nephew, Patrick, and she was running late for her meeting because her oldest child, Danny, was fussy that morning. As Kim approached the Trade Towers that morning the attack had already begun. She worked for the Marsh and McLennon Companies. Their offices were in the impact zone of American Airlines Flight #11. No one present in those offices at the time survived the attack. 295 employees of the Marsh Company died on 9/11, and except for a fussy baby, Kim would have been 296. I would never have gotten to know Patrick who is a most soulful boy. And my tears earlier this week were also for Danny and Patrick's younger brother, Liam Ragan as Suzanne McCabe talked about her Brother Mike's children one of whom is named Liam and another who is named Regan. If Kim had died that day, Liam would not be with us either and he is such a cool little boy.

Suzanne McCabe finished her essay by saying that her brother's children "have lived with constant reminders of 9/11: images of the burning towers, ghostly footage of Osama Bin Laden, the wars following the attacks and the fights over the wars. They have borne a nearly unbearable sorrow, and yet, like their dad, they're just about the coolest people I know."

Knowing my own emotions in remembering 9/11, I can barely comprehend the anguish, pain and, yes, anger of those who lost relatives and loved ones. That loss can never be undone, never be made right. And when I came to the scripture for this day with such a heavy emphasis on forgiveness, all I could say is "Really". "Really you want me to talk about forgiveness on this anniversary, Really!" Actually, I was thinking something a little more intense than that, but I am a priest and this is a pulpit, so I will not speak it.

The readings for this 24th Sunday in ordinary time were not chosen because of 9/11. They just happen this year to coincide with the tenth anniversary. And after the readings were proclaimed, you responded by saying "Thanks be to God." Were you truly thankful for this Word of the Lord? What does this particular word mean to you on this particular and painful occasion? Can we choose to ignore what we have just acknowledged as God's Word? Or will simply dismiss it outright?

In a way that is almost eerily prophetic, these readings are challenging us to give witness in a way we rarely have the opportunity to do as Catholics. The Word is not calling us to minimize or forget our pain and loss, much less the pain and loss of others. Nor is it calling us to call evil

“good.” It is, however, challenging us in a most disturbing way to give witness to our conviction that love is more powerful than hate, forgiveness more God-like than vengeance and healing more powerful than death.

We gather here Sunday after Sunday to proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. His Resurrection tells us that love triumphs over hatred and good has won the victory over evil. His Resurrection tells us that light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Our faith takes everything that is paradoxical and sees it in the clearest possible light. And then it asks us to take one more sublime, seemingly – but only seemingly- crazy step further. In this case the big step is to forgive the unforgivable. Ten years after 9/11 we are not finished grieving our lost brothers and sisters, our lost innocence, our lost sense of security. We are not finished being angry. And yet God’s word would remind us that there are no limits to God’s forgiveness, nor should there be on ours.

But in this situation how? I wish I knew. I wish there were a mystical way to click on a forgiveness switch in the human heart. I wish I knew how to love all my enemies and pray for all my persecutors. As I move towards that almost impossible step that faith asks us to take, I think perhaps that forgiveness – like conversion – is a journey. The human heart isn’t necessarily converted over night. We don’t all have that electrifying moment on the road to Damascus that St. Paul had. For many of us, it grows out of what Flannery O’Connor called “a habit of being.” It happens over a lifetime. It may begin in small and everyday ways: I will forgive you for leaving your dishes in the sink, being late to pick me up, forgetting my birthday, you forgive me for being too avid of a Phillies fan and so on. But in fact, these everyday ways are ultimately about developing an attitude of forgiveness that can define our lives. Without that kind of attitude, what will we do about the really difficult situations in life:

...the close friend who says something hurtful behind your back;

...the spouse who cheats;

...a Wayland Brown who abused too many of our young teenage boys;

...a Ronnie Burke who so brutally murdered Tamara Cundey Dunstan;

...the terrorists who plotted and carried out the attacks on 9/11?

Perhaps, we are not quite ready to answer those tough questions. Perhaps, on our own we will never be ready. But with God’s grace, I hope and pray that our little acts of forgiveness that we practice everyday will one day move us beyond the fear and anger that we still wrestle with on this tenth anniversary of 9/11.

This is a Day of Remembrance. Are we ready for it also to be a Day of Forgiveness? Remembering is a process, a spiritual one at that, by which we come to terms with our mortality and flawed humanity, as well as the power of the Resurrection in which our God will always have

the last word and it will be a word of Love.

As we come forward today to receive the God who gives Himself to us in Love, I pray that we will find in Him the strength to reach out to our little part of the world and mend it with acts of kindness, forgiveness and mercy. Do not give up on this old world of ours! It may take us seventy times seven times but I am still convinced that as a Catholic people we can make the Love of God an ever greater reality in our world. So go forth from this holy sanctuary today with peace and love in your hearts; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor everyone. Love and serve the Lord.

And on this day of Remembrance let us in a very special way remember the heroes of that day and in the days since, the heroes of the war on terrorism. Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them. May their soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen! Amen!