

## Reflections on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001

As I prepared for this homily as we mark 16 years since the terror attacks on the United States that led to almost 3000 deaths, I googled *lessons learned from Sept. 11, 2001*. There were many references that discussed air travel safety, international affairs, communications among first responders, military actions, building safety precautions and so forth. They sounded like good ideas to me and I am sure experts in the various fields have been addressing these issues.

So, in turn, I thought about some of the spiritual lessons that might learn from the day and the days that followed.

**The first is obvious.** In the Scriptures, we often read, *we do not know the hour or the day*, when we will be called home to God. It was an ordinary day. People were at their desks working as they sipped a morning coffee. Others were flying for business or to meet family. Everyone no doubt had a thousand things to do that day, and a million things on their mind. I wonder if anyone thought this is the day I will die. The Word of God does not tell us to be prepared to go home to God to scare us, but rather to call us to live in a way that there is no unfinished business, no need to forgive someone or to say I am sorry, or I love you. That day taught us that every moment is a gift from God. It taught us that this is the only moment we have, that our lives are fragile. It taught us to consider what is important and what is not important.

**Equally Important to the first lesson is that of the gift of faith in God.** I often hear people say at times of death, where would we be without our faith. We recall people on Flight 93 asking phone operators to lead them in the *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm* or the *Our Father*. The candles and spontaneous shrines that filled our cities and towns were to me images of prayer. In the darkness and horror, in the moments of desperation and darkness, we most naturally cry out to our God. Where would we be without our faith?

**Another lesson:** I do not think we needed to learn that evil is very real. We know that from history and the news of the day, how bad human beings can treat one another. We think of practice of slavery or the Holocaust to name but two. We met evil very much face to face on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. But we also saw humanity at its finest, giving us a glimpse of the divine grace of God. We witnessed firefighters and police officers rushing into burning buildings. Ordinary people assisting one another on darkened staircases. We saw courageous people

on United Flight 93 rise up to seek to overcome evil. We learned that heroes were not athletes and Hollywood actresses, but our neighbors and friends. In the days that followed, the outpouring of love on those who suffered losses was overwhelming. God's love is far beyond the power of evil.

**Lesson Four:** On that day, we experience what we already knew, but often take for granted. We needed each other. The phone systems crashed since countless calls were made to reach out to loved ones. We gathered in our homes, at our work places, on the streets our churches and offered words of comfort and support to one another. Our families, our friends, our neighbors, with all their faults and failures, are essential to our lives. No one goes it alone. We need each other.

**Finally, lesson five:** Everyone one of I am sure has more than one 9/11 experience. I think of two that stay with me. There were so many funerals at the time of 9/11, especially for the firefighters and police, that people who did not know the deceased were encouraged to go to the funerals since the first responders could not attend all the many funerals that were going on simultaneously. And many people did this as their way of showing their love and respect. The second story I think and experienced personally was as the recovery workers left the devastated site of the World Trade Towers, there were thirty or forty people who gathered for several months to cheer for the rescue workers as they went in and out of the entrance to the towers on West Street. When asked why they did this, they said, *we were not able to do anything else so we did this.* Small acts done in love are graces from God.

I have learned these lessons, but I often easily forget them, and fail in their practice. So, on this day, it is good to remember them, and to seek to renew them in our daily lives. We pray to not forget what we have learned from this heart-breaking time.

