

Moving On: Closer to the Heart of God

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, September 11, 2010.
The Annual Service in Commemoration of 9/11.*

When I was a little boy, all my friends wanted to be firemen. I wanted to be a teacher. Nerdy, even then. But when I grew up and had a son of my own, he wanted to be a fireman. As it turns out, he is not one; but if he had been, I would have been proud, also scared but very, very proud.

Every year when we place these photographs along this wall, I think long and hard about what these men did, about what firefighters do every day, men and women who run into burning buildings to save people, pets, and property. It is hard for us non-firefighters to truly understand. They go largely undefended; some first responders, also wonderful and brave, have guns that help protect them as they make their approach to unsafe areas; not so with firefighters, they go with their bodies, running into the darkness, not knowing what they will find but willing to give all that they have and all that they are. Among so many other meanings, that also must surely mean that they are a little crazy; and all of us are so much better and safer because they are.

As 9/11 approaches each year, there is always a lot of talk about moving on. Sometimes the conversation is not as sensitive as it should be; so often the advice to move on is given by people who don't have as much to move on from. But there is more than a little merit to the idea. I pray that all of you—all of us—but particularly I pray that you who lost so much nine years ago today will indeed in time be able to move on, as many of you are, to have good and full lives, to feel joy without guilt for having survived, to laugh and cry, to sing and dance, grabbing and cherishing every second of this life if for no other reason but to

honor the ones lost.

Today, though, we stop, and we remember; and as long as you desire, we here at St. Bart's will gather with you in this great old place that has contained the joy and sadness of so many who have gone before us. Today we allow ourselves to acknowledge the gaping hole left in our hearts and souls, an absence so poignant nine years ago, an absence that remains to this day. Part of the public discourse right now addresses the notion of sacred ground, about what sacred ground is and what it isn't. I don't know about all of that and the thoughts I do have don't seem worth adding to the conversation. But I do know this; in fact, I know it emphatically: the pierced place in your heart where you hold the ones you loved and lost is deeply and eternally sacred ground, a holy place so co-mingled with God and love that it both breaks your heart anew and heals as only the love of God can. Moving on does not change the sacredness of the remembering, the sacredness of that private place so near the quick; it simply gives it room for life—this life and the one beyond—room for it to breathe and flourish.

In today's gospel Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." I don't know how to do that; honestly I don't have a clue about truly living into those lofty words. But I do think that I know why Jesus said them, why he would have said something so outrageous as "love your enemies." He told us that, I think, because he knew, probably knew in his own heart, how easy it is to hate enemies, the easiest thing in the world; but more importantly he knew how destructive it is to us, to our souls when we do,

when we give ourselves and our lives over to hate for anyone, including hate for our enemies. It chews us up from the inside out, keeping us victims and locking us in tragedies that rob us and others of life. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus said, “so that you may be free to be the children of God you are created to be.”

The attacks occurred on a bright Tuesday morning, but for us that day will live forever as Good Friday, a day when darkness descended—and hung low and heavy for a long time. But darkness did not win; it never does. Death in all its power and presence and stench does not win; for even on Good Friday, when the world is ripped apart and buildings crash to the ground, there is the promise of Easter. Jesus showed us the way and shows us again and again the way,

the way to life: hate keeps us in the darkness but love—imperfect, incomplete, a work in progress—but love nonetheless—is the way to Easter. It always is. Hate can never free us from the chains of death; only love can do that.

We don't have to understand how to do that; we don't even have to always believe that it is possible. What we just have to do is the next right thing, doing the best we can, loving those around us and praying that our love will get bigger and bigger. For you see, even when love is weak, wounded and tentative as our love often is, the desire to love God does, in fact, please God; and each act of love we can muster moves us—and not just us but the world—closer to the heart of God. That is the biggest hope we can hope.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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