

Purposeful memory

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 21, 2011, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 16:13-20.*

Once upon a time, the end of summer mostly meant relief for parents and dread for kids. There were the school clothes and supplies shopping trips, a final beach weekend, a few more snow cones. I was such a nerdy little kid that I actually looked forward to new notebooks, pencils, compasses. Do you remember compasses—the kind with the sharp end and the half pencil? I don't recall actually using one—well, there was the time I jabbed Wally Caldwell with one, but my recollection is that he deserved it. But I loved getting all that stuff every year and feeling the excitement of a new class. In my case, ending summer baseball activities never seemed like a bad idea but a great relief. It was so hard to read in the outfield.

But ten years ago, the end of summer—particularly for us in New York City and to some degree elsewhere—came to be imprinted with another and darker association. For us of a certain age that imprinting is likely permanent: we shall never come to summer's end without some recollection of the events of 9/11. This year, as we mark the 10th anniversary, there will be many, many events, including ours, three weeks from today. On that Sunday we will honor all those lost, particularly the firemen in our immediate neighborhood.

These valiant men walked into burning buildings, knowing at the very least that they did so at great risk, if not knowing literally that their deaths were imminent. Though heroes and heroines around the world perform great and largely unrecognized acts every day, these firemen and other first responders will live deeply in our hearts forever. Recalling that bravery brings particular resonance to our hearing of Paul's words to the Romans: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*

Is Paul writing about the kind of ultimate sacrifice given on 9/11? Well, on one level, perhaps not, but who knows? And, on another and more important one, of course, he is. More than is often apparent to us as modern Christians, every day brought life and death concerns to Christians in the early years. To be clear, I don't know or care if the firemen who died believed that they were being like Christ; I don't know or care if they were church people or Christians at all, though I suspect most of them were Roman Catholics; I don't know or care about their piety or lack of it. What I know and honor is that the code to which they devoted themselves and for which they died led them to live and die sacrificially. Their actions, and actions like those by people of all and no faiths, live near the heart of God.

The easiest thing for us to do in our observance of this anniversary is to focus simply and without broader thought on the lives of these who gave so much. Of course, we honor and memorialize them. Rightly we do so. But the question for us is what does it mean to us? How did the events of a decade ago and those that followed transform us? Is our world bigger or smaller? Is our God more expansive, less exclusively ours, or is God diminished, more parochial? And what of the interior of our souls? Are we more or less profoundly afraid? Do we know what in our lives is worth dying for?

To me, these lingering questions are the defining questions of our era as a nation and as a church. If we answer them wrongly or without thought, or if we allow them to be answered for us without intense reflection and discourse, we do so at great peril.

This brilliant portion of Paul's letter to the Romans can help us, I believe, in understanding, if not the specific answers to these questions, then at least the life context in which we can "live the questions," as Rilke says we must. Coming at the end of what is in effect a statement of systematic theology, this chapter and the following chapters tell us how to live. Paul never understood the process of following Jesus, of being a Christian, to be something like another club affiliation. He would say that when we are defining ourselves, Christian is not on a list of descriptors but the container into which everything else about us

is placed. We are business people with a certain character, which is shaped by values conformed to what we believe to be consonant with the teachings of Jesus. We are parents, lovers, Republicans, Democrats, etc., who choose to be each of these in a particular way, a way that purports to emulate Jesus. Jesus' way is not the only way to be faithful and righteous, but it is *our* way; and unless we are clear about it, we, given our orientation as Christians, will not be rooted. We will find that we exist without real shape and form, that we float from one guru, concept or diet to the next, that in fact we inculcate the values of our culture, simply calling them spiritual values whether or not they truly are.

Paul admonished his readers to know who they were so that they would not be subject simply to the prevailing wind of the time. That kind of fickleness is the particular pitfall of the young. Who of us does not remember times in our lives when we believed what we read last? Good Lord, I do. I tried on more spiritual outfits than I care to remember. Mother used to say of me, "We are so glad Buddy didn't come home leading a cow and wearing long yellow robes." Upon reflection, I came home wearing much worse, certainly metaphorically! It is interesting that in the end what Paul truly is suggesting about the spiritual life is that we be grown-ups. When he says to do that which is "good and acceptable and perfect," the word he used for perfect, *teleios*, is more accurately translated "mature."

Paul writes, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." When I admit the energy—physical, emotional, and, yes, spiritual—that is wasted on one-upping one another, it wears me out and shames me. Our call is to be something radically different from that: to know who we are, accepting our strengths and weaknesses, being aware that we perform better than some and less well than others. We live sometimes as though we are only good if someone else is not as good; no wonder we are so often anxious and unimaginative. We are suffocated by comparisons. Paul essentially says, "Grow up and stop doing that so that you may really live."

The anniversary of a big event in our lives, like 9/11, has the potential to slap us around a bit—in the best way. Sometimes I want to say to myself (and, frankly, I must admit I often want to say it to others, maybe even some of you), "What are you *doing*? Stop this craziness that you are calling life and start really living!" Many of us remember those poignant days immediately following the attacks, days when we would not think of having a day go by without telling the people we love the most in the world how much we love them, when little acts of kindness meant more to us than they ever had, when petty details seemed insignificant and were appropriately dismissed.

Even as I can hear the whisper of the wise among us preparing to remind me that we cannot survive at that pitch of emotional and spiritual acuity, which is to say we can't survive and keep our jobs and do what we are supposed to do and remain that spiritually alert, I say to you, "Yes, we can—and more, yes we **must**." It is the choice for life, it is the choice to understand our true identity as people of God, it is the choice to live fully and abundantly. Why would we settle for less?

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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