



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector

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## The Holy Work of Moving On

*Sermon preached at the 12:05 pm service on September 11, 2012*

*The 9/11 Memorial Service*

*Based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and Matthew 5:43-48*

Today we gather to mark the 11th anniversary of September 11, 2001. A day on which many lives were lost, and many lives were saved. Life changed that day.

Ever since that day, September 11 isn't just another one of the 365 days of the year. The term "9/11" carries a whole new meaning and a weight of associations. Ground Zero refers to a very specific place. Air travel is different now. Life is different, not only for us in New York, but for much of the world.

It feels a bit eerie to me that our weather today looks and feels so much like that crisp, startlingly clear day eleven years ago. I'm sure every one of us remembers with equally startling clarity exactly where we were on that day.

After living happily in Manhattan (and being a member of St. Bart's) for 14 years, I had just moved out of Manhattan to start seminary in California. September 11 was my fifth day of classes.

I was the only student from New York at my school, so I thought I might be the only one affected by the unbelievable things I was hearing and seeing on the news. But I quickly learned that everyone in my new community 3,000 miles away felt connections to New York, to DC, to Pennsylvania—either because they had family, friends, colleagues in those places, or simply because their hearts shared the anguish of their fellow human beings. We had no trouble filling every slot of the round-the-clock prayer vigil.

All I wanted was to come back. If I could have found any way to get back to New York that day, I would have. It took two weeks to get a seat on one of the first flights back. I went immediately to Ground Zero, where ash still coated everything and where smoke was still rising. Tears and prayers were the only offering I could make at Ground Zero. Then I came here to St. Bart's. I remember the eerie quiet of the city, the changed feeling of it.

Each of you has your own memories of that day. All of us bring our memories with us here today, into this holy place, where tears and prayers and hope are offered, as they have been every one of these eleven years. This is a place made holy by the tears and prayers and anguish and hopes and promises offered here in this space for close to 100 years.

We gather here today to remember and honor these particular firemen whose photographs are here—these brothers, sons, fathers—our neighbors in the truest and deepest sense of that word, who gave their lives in the line of duty to save others and to keep us safe.

We also remember and honor all the women and men who perished on September 11. We remember and honor, too, all those who have given—and continue to give—of themselves in heroic service, doing the work of healing and rebuilding in our city, in our country, and throughout the world.

In gathering here together, we draw strength from each other, from our tradition and from the sacraments. In gathering together we are reminded that we are not alone.

We are reminded that we are here for each other. We are here to share memories—the painful ones as well as the joyous ones. We are here to help each other through the hard times. We are here to laugh and to celebrate with each other in the good times *and* even in the midst of the hard times. We are here to be reminded that yes, for everything there is a season. We are here to help each other recognize and name those seasons of our lives.

We are here to remember that God is always present with us, that we are always in God's heart, and that there is nothing—*absolutely nothing*—that can ever change that.

For the past five years, I've had the privilege of standing at these front doors alongside my St. Bart's colleagues, to welcome all those who come to this service of hope and remembrance.

Each year I am deeply moved and awed anew by the presence of so many firefighters and other first responders. What moves me is not the dress uniforms, impressive as those are. What moves me so deeply is this: When I stand at the door and fireman after fireman shakes my hand with his strong and

carefully gentle hand, and looks me directly and calmly in the eye, on a very deep level I feel *safe*. Remarkable how much can be communicated in so brief a moment.

Last year, of course, marked the 10th anniversary of 9/11, with the opening of the 9/11 Memorial and with special events all over the country. This year remembrances seem quieter, with less press. There is sometimes mention that, especially after ten years, we need to be “moving on,” a bit of advice more easily offered by those who have less to move on from, by those who’ve lost less.

We are moving on, of course. As we have been ever since that fateful day. Even in the face of staggering loss and pain, the loss of those closest to us, the loss of trust—even then we move on, as best we can. We may get stopped in our tracks for a time; we may stagger and wander in the desert for a while. But we are hard-wired (by God, I would say) to move on, to choose life. We are created to live life richly and fully, savoring and cherishing each and every moment, even the hard ones.

Moving on does *not* mean forgetting those who perished. Moving on does *not* mean ceasing to gather to remember and honor them. Moving on means remembering them and honoring them; it means carrying our woundedness and going on anyway. Moving on means not forgetting, but rather allowing—even actively seeking ways for—our woundedness to be transformed into something life-giving *as a way of honoring those whose lives were lost*.

Moving on, healing and rebuilding lives, finding ways to nurture new life, helping bring about new life takes time and courage and the support of community.

I could not move on with seminary until I had come home to New York. A mother finds ways to rear her children and to let them know the kind of person their father was, what he did on September 11, and how much he loved them. Parents who lost their daughter on September 11 establish a scholarship fund to help educate the children who lost a parent that day. A man grieves for the love of his life, lost that day; over time, his heart heals and he dares to trust and love again.

In ways small and large, we do move on, carrying our memories. We help each other carry our memories, and we help each other to find—and give—new life. Even something as small as a smile, a loving look, a handshake, can be life-giving—for the one you give it to, and for yourself as well.

This is holy work.

There is nothing holier, or harder, or more life-giving, than loving our enemies. That is an eternal struggle for us humans. It has been throughout all history, and it has certainly been at the center of our struggles since September 11.

In community, we help each other learn to love our enemies, so that hatred does not destroy us from the inside out. For something that hard, we need God’s grace, too. And we have that. We have God’s grace in abundance.

By God’s grace, we do move on, both carrying our memories and finding new life.

By God’s grace, we participate in this holy and life-giving work of God,  
the God who is creating us,  
the God who loves us beyond measure,  
the God who, even out of death, brings new life.

Amen.

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