

SEPTEMBER 11 2011 SERMON

Ten years seems to have passed in the blink of an eye. With little to no effort, I can remember sitting horror-struck and dumbfounded in front of the television watching the wreckage, flames and destruction. In an instant, everything seemed different and surreal, like the world as we knew it would never be the same.

At the same time, September 11, 2001, feels like a lifetime ago. My children, then in elementary school, are now in college and high school. This post-9/11 world is all they've ever known. Calamities may provide major historical dividers, but they're too big to wrap our arms around and use to make sense of our daily lives and so perhaps out of necessity we find other markers - - birthdays, graduations, milestones of various sorts -- to chart the passage of time, and we look to the mundane events of everyday life for the fleeting evidences of grace that sustain us in the here and now.

There's some wisdom in that observation, I think, to help us mark the 10th anniversary of 9-11-2001 and to hear the gospel inherent in the passages we read today. We're called, indeed, to look back, to remember, to give pause to grieve the violence, destruction and death as well as to

rejoice in the acts of courage, mercy and solidarity that that day and those that followed called forth. We're also called to look forward, to look and lean into a future that isn't defined by the calamity of that day but instead is shaped by hope, possibility and the grace of God.

That's the essence of mercy: the lifting of a burden, the releasing of a debt and the refusal to allow past actions and failures to define the future. Both the first reading and gospel speak to these matters and serve well on a day like this. In the first reading, Jonah disobeys God's command not because of faithlessness, but because of his faith in the mercy of God. He knows that God's mercy extends even to the enemy. Jonah wants to see the people of Nineveh destroyed because they've inflicted such pain and misery on his people. Not Jonah's will, but rather God's will is done. The gospel lesson tells the parable of how we're called to set aside our traditions to show mercy to the suffering as God shows mercy. We're also called to receive mercy from those who offer it when God provides them to us. God can weave from whatever strands of brokenness, heartache or calamity we've suffered a future that's, in the end, good.

The parable also implies, perhaps, that while mercy can be called for, it can't be forced. It

can be hard to understand why some of those who lost loved ones on 9-11 have been able to move to mercy and forgiveness while others who suffered no personal loss struggle to do the same. Nor is the mystery of forgiveness limited to the enormity of 9-11; we've all at one time or another gotten "stuck" by some offense or personal slight and overlooked the manifold grace extended to us by countless others. Perhaps Jesus commands such extravagant mercy because he knows it may take some of us that long for it to really sink into our hearts and minds. For this reason, this is a parable that speaks most powerfully when we address it first to ourselves rather than using it as a standard by which to judge others.

This Sunday we take time to remember the events of September 11 a decade ago when four hijacked airplanes wreaked such destruction and woe. We also remember the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call down from heaven mercy and forgiveness, not vengeance and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by calculations but trust, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love and not by death

but new life. That's what forgiveness and mercy can do. May God give to all of us a palpable sense of the forgiveness in which and *by* which we live and grant us the faith and courage to walk into the future created by such mercy and forgiveness. Let us pray. *O God, you've called us to ventures of which we can't see the ending, by paths yet untrodden and through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*