

SERMON - THE 12<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY - 11 SEPTEMBER 2010  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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There are days when I get troubled with God, and I had one this week during my stay in Montreal at a sales meeting. I was lying in bed about 3:00 AM half awake, half asleep. I was thinking about the horrific events of 9/11/2001, a date whose 10 anniversary we remember today. It was probably the result of the media deluge that we have seen and heard during this past week, and the more I thought about it, the more troubled I became. The mental images that ran through my mind of the burning and ultimately collapsing towers, much of which I had watched in real-time on the television, were obviously disturbing, even after ten years. I thought about the horrible things than humans do to each other, and that led to thoughts about fascism and World War II, communism and the Cold War, and now a new term I have just heard – Islaminism - the rise of a militant form of Islamic ideology dedicated to the destruction of everyone and everything that is not based on Islam, Mohammed, and the Koran. Images of world hunger and the millions of people who don't have enough to eat ran through my mind. I thought of other millions of people who are persecuted for their beliefs, or their race, or their color. Additional troubling images crowded my mind, and I finally had to mentally disengage myself from these thoughts, in the process becoming wide awake.

I thought to myself, why does God let these things go on? He has the power to stop and correct these horrendous events. He is the Creator of mankind; He is the Ruler of the universe. Why isn't He stepping in here and fixing these situations. Major segments of his creation, innocent people, are being subjected to trials that are not of their doing, while other segments are gaining obscene wealth and power at the expense of their fellow men. Why is God allowing this continue??? I started getting myself all worked up again.

And then a still, small voice in my head said: "Are you done; do you feel better?" I mentally replied: "Yes, I guess I am done, but No, I don't feel any better."

The voice responded: "What is it you want of me?" I should tell you at this point that I have these "discussions" with some regularity. Some people including my atheist brother would tell you that it is my imagination and / or my conscience working in my mind. I think it is the Holy Spirit working in me, and my experience has been that as these "mental discussions" proceed I end up working my way through the issue under consideration, and arriving at a conclusion that is Christian and faith-based. I therefore choose to see these "discussions" through to the end.

So I mentally responded: "I want you to fix these problems; I want you to heal the people that are hurting, and hurt the people that are benefiting from this corruption of justice!"

The voice responded: "Why; do you think I caused these problems?" "No", I said, "but you can fix them!"

The Spirit responded: “Yes, I can fix them, but I choose not to. When I created humans, I gave them sovereign free will; the ability to make their own decisions, even if they go in a direction that is counter to what I want. To fix these problems myself would be to remove that free will I gave mankind, and reduce you to a role of slave and servant to me. That is not what I created you for; I created you in my image – to be a reflection of me. I have given you tools and direction to accomplish that, but it is you who has to use them. It is you who has to fix the problem, because it is mankind that has created the problem, not me.”

Somewhat chastised at this point, I ask: “How do I fix these things?” The answer mimics what we have seen in scripture: “What is the Summary of the Law?” “To love God”, I respond, and “to love my neighbor as myself”. “Right”, God responds, “and let’s focus on ‘love thy neighbor’ because in doing so you show your love of me”.

I persist: “OK, so I am to love and forgive my neighbor; to tolerate the many things that they do that they shouldn’t – to subordinate myself to them”.

“No, the answer comes back; you are getting ‘love’ screwed up in your mind. My love is a demanding love – it has expectations and it has specific direction. You show love in meeting those expectations, and reflecting those expectations in your dealings with your neighbor; not in tolerating their lack of acceptable performance”.

“But you tolerate my lack of performance; you forgive me” I respond. “Yes, I forgive you”, comes the reply, “but I don’t drop my expectations of you. “Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life following the commandments of God and walking from henceforth in this holy ways – do you remember that passage? My forgiveness is based on repentance, and an intent to meet my expectations; it is not based on tolerance of poor performance. Humans are responsible for their actions; humans today focus too much on ‘rights’, and not enough on ‘responsibilities’. I forgive, but I don’t reduce my expectations – and I expect you to do the same”.

“So I am to forgive the perpetrators of 9/11?”, I ask. “Yes”, God responds, “although I’m not sure you are ready to do so yet. At a minimum you should take away from that horrible event the lessons that are to be learned from that day. It was filled with examples of both the worst, and the best, that people could be to each other. I’ve shown you clear examples of both, and you know what I expect of you. What you do is up to you. I’m not going to fix your problems, but you and your fellow humans are fully capable of doing so, if you follow what I have shown you.” With that, the mental voice fell silent, and I started to think about what had transpired.

September 11, 2001 was indeed a particularly graphic day of the best and the worst that humans can be, but when you think about it, every day is loaded with examples of both. God presents us with opportunities every day to experience what He expects us to do, and not do. He uses them as a means of guiding and encouraging us to meet His

expectations. Many times, these “opportunities” come at us so fast and intensely that they seem to overwhelm our ability to deal with them.

A friend sent me the following story some time back, and it has a valuable lesson about dealing with adversity. A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things had become so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it. She wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed them on a range to heat. As soon as the pots were hot, she placed carrots in the first one, eggs in the second, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and cook; without saying a word. When she turned off the burners, she fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl. Turning to her daughter, she asked, 'Tell me what you see.' 'Carrots, eggs, and coffee,' her daughter replied. Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hardboiled egg. Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma. The daughter then asked, 'What does it mean, mother?'

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrots went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, they softened and became weak. The eggs had been fragile; their thin outer shell had protected the liquid interior, but after sitting in the boiling water, the inside had become hard. The coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water. 'Which are you?' she asked her daughter. 'When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?'

Think of this: Which are each of us? Are we the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity wilts and becomes soft? Are we the egg that starts with a soft heart, but changes with heat and adversity to become hardened and stiff even though we look the same on the outside? Or are we like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavor. If we are like the bean, when things are at their worst, we get better and change the situation around us.

Perhaps this is the lesson that we are supposed to take away from this anniversary remembrance of 9/11 – that we can be, and are expected to be, better than what a few of us showed we were on that day ten years ago. It takes time; God is right, I'm not ready to forgive the people behind the events of that day, but I am willing to try and show that I am capable of more than they were – that I can spend my time trying to get better and change the situation around me to better meet God's expectations. Do you remember the Maureen McGovern song “There's Got to be a Morning After”? That's part of God's forgiveness – He hasn't reduced His expectations; He's given us another day to try and

meet them. It may be a beautiful day, or a day full of adversity, but in it will be the opportunity to illustrate to ourselves and to our neighbors that we can be better than we were the day before. God is not going to fix our problems; he is going to use them to teach us to fix them ourselves. May we prove that we are up to the task. *Amen.*