

NOT SOMETHING WE WANT TO GET GOOD AT

Sermon, September 11, 2016

Texts: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; I Timothy 1:12-17

It's hard to believe it has been fifteen years to the day since nineteen hijackers of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda commandeered four commercial passenger jet airliners and turned them into missiles. The murderers intentionally crashed two of the airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing everyone on board. Both buildings collapsed within two hours, destroying nearby buildings and claiming nearly three thousand lives. I learned just this past week the copilot of the second plane was the 1985 quarterback of my college football team; I did not know him, as he was on the team long after I had played, but Mike Horrocks was a former Marine who flew C-130s; on September 11, 2001, he was the 35 year old father of two small children ... his daughter just started fourth grade and his son started first.¹ The family lived just two or three miles from my parent's home. The third airliner crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia; the fourth crashed into a field near in rural Shanksville, Pennsylvania after some of its passengers boldly and bravely attempted to retake control of the plane. There were no survivors on any of the planes. The September 11 attacks killed 2,996 people and injured more than 6,000 others. These immediate deaths included 265 on the four planes, 2,606 in the World Trade Center and in the surrounding area, and 125 at the Pentagon. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were the deadliest terrorist act in world history. I vividly remember the Presbyterian Women having their Fall Coffee that morning, and we set up televisions to follow what was going on. Many of us were glued to our television screens and saw the collapse of the World Trade Center as it happened. It is a sight we will never forget. On the plaque under Mike's statue at West Chester University's Farrell Stadium (*where I played during my college days*) is this phrase in bold capital letters ... "WE SHALL NEVER FORGET."

And we shouldn't!

The overwhelming majority of casualties in the attacks were civilians, including nationals of over ninety countries. This wasn't just an attack on America; this was a cruel and merciless attack on civilization. Included among the victims that day were 421 responders, firefighters and police personnel, who had come to rescue people. Fifteen years later, that casualty toll is estimated to have reached over *one thousand four hundred* due to traumatic injuries and illnesses directly attributable to the toxicity of hazardous materials inhaled by many. Over one thousand four hundred people! Killed for simply trying to help. They deserve to be remembered. As do the 6,828 men and women who died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation New Dawn in Afghanistan, giving their lives seeking to keep us safe from terror. If we forget, we dishonor their memory. (*At least eleven unborn babies also died. As of August 2013, medical authorities concluded that 1,140 people who worked, lived, or studied in Lower Manhattan at the time of the attack have been diagnosed with cancer as a result of "exposure to toxins at Ground Zero."*)²

One of our lectionary readings today is (*partially*) about not forgetting. Paul remembered and regretted the destruction and hurt he caused others in his misguided religious zeal as a Pharisee of Pharisees. As I mentioned when we last looked at the story of Paul's conversion in April,³ I'm sure you've heard people say, "*It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it with all your heart. Sincerity is what matters.*" I said then as I say now ... do we realize how silly that is? Especially on this fifteenth anniversary of a despicable evil perpetrated by those following their sincere religious convictions? Paul, then Saul, was an intensely religious man following the dictates of his convictions. Saul sincerely believed something with all his heart, but he was sincerely wrong ... and it was killing a whole lot of people around him! He meant it when he wrote to Timothy he was the worst of sinners; he wasn't using hyperbole here. He knew he had been a violent, blasphemous, ignorant brute, a brute in need of mercy and forgiveness, and he found that mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Paul would be the first to say that forgiveness is not simply sentimental tolerance. Without repentance on the part of the offender, forgiveness can degenerate into a condoning acceptance and even an enabling of evil of the worst kind.

New Testament scholar Douglas Hare warns against confusing forgiveness with sentimental toleration by "forgiving too much too quickly." He wrote, "*The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. Teenagers who betray their parent's trust are not simply to be forgiven; a much more loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so they can regain trust. Premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help.*" And terrorists who ruthlessly take innocent human life are not to blithely forgiven or tolerated, they are to be stopped. Life is sacred, and those who trifle with innocent life are not to be put up with. We are not to repay evil with evil, however. We are not to hate. Ann Lamott wrote that harboring hate within is like feeding yourself rat poison, and then waiting for the rat to die. Yes, we are to be gracious; yes, we are to be ready to

¹ See http://articles.philly.com/2010-09-12/news/24999269_1_statue-hero-legends

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_September_11_attacks

³ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/the-recognition-factor1.pdf>

forgive ... but we are also to remember. Where there is repentance on the part of the offender, forgiveness is our obligation. But beware of forgiving and forgetting too much too quickly; be certain there is a genuine repentance on the part of the offender(s). Evil has consequences, serious consequences, and is not to be readily tolerated ... a blithe tolerance of evil is not something we want to get good at! It does no one any good.

Our Old Testament reading mentions something else we don't want to get good at. God says through the prophet Jeremiah, *"My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* And as a result, calamity is about to overtake them. That, by the way, is what happens when people get skilled at doing evil ... they forget how to do good! You can't just "turn it off." We don't want to become practiced liars, because eventually we'll find ourselves unable to speak truthfully ... practice truthfulness, not deceit! When we become experienced at doing evil, we eventually lose the ability to be faithful husbands and wives, good parents, conscientious citizens, honorable businesspeople, good neighbors. It's foolish to want to be good in doing evil, rather than wanting to be good at doing good! Tolerance of evil is not something we want to get good at, and the practice of evil is not something we want to get good at, either!

On Palm Sunday 2010 Lambs Creek Bible Church in Mansfield, PA posted on their church sign *"This Sunday: National Atheist's Holiday"* Palm Sunday that year fell on April 1st ... April Fools Day. Below that line the sign spelled out the words to Psalm 14:1: *"THE FOOL SAYS IN HIS HEART THERE IS NO GOD."* Interestingly, in the Hebrew text of that Psalm the words "there is" are not there. In the original, there is no "there is" there. What the verse literally says is, *"The fool says in his heart, 'No God.'" (In the King James Version, the words "there is" are in italics.)* If one would just add a comma in the right spot (and as you may or may not know, there are no punctuation marks in the original text), you would have *"The fool has said in his heart, 'No, God!'"* Both interpretations and/or nuances are warranted! In effect, there really are two types of atheists: the intellectual atheist, and the practical atheist. The intellectual atheist is the person who believes there is no God; by the way, these people are far fewer in number than we might think. People see a car and they say *"Yes, there is an auto manufacturer;"* people see a beautiful portrait and they say *"Yes, there is an artist;"* people see a Rolex watch and they say *"Yes, there is a watchmaker;"* people read a book and they say *"Yes, there is an author;"* but few intellectually honest people can look at the complexity and intricacy of creation (which is far more complex and intricate than any watch, car, book or painting!) and honestly (and foolishly!) say *"There is no God."* But that's the intellectual atheist. The practical atheist, on the other hand, is the person who says, *"No, God!"* He or she knows, acknowledges, admits there is a God, but lives and behaves as if there is no God. This is the person who wants nothing to do with God, nothing to do with God's principles, God's people, or God's purposes. This person wants to live by his or her own lights, without any deference or submission to the Divine. Such people are more common than we might think.

Some of you may remember the name William Murray, the son of the famous atheist, Madalyn Murray O'Hair (not Bill Murray the actor). He was ostensibly the chief plaintiff in the landmark 1963 Supreme Court decision *Murray vs Curlett* in which prayer and Bible reading were declared to be unconstitutional and removed from public schools, a lawsuit spearheaded by his militant mom (I'm old enough to remember having the school day begin with the Pledge of Allegiance, then the Lord's Prayer and a short Bible reading by the teacher; the latter two suddenly stopped in fourth grade). What you may not know is that the then-schoolboy William Murray grew up to become a fervent Christian and an ordained minister; he is now chairman of the Religious Freedom Coalition, a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C., active on issues related to the rights and protection of Christians in the Middle East (see <http://www.religiousfreedomcoalition.org>). In a speech thirty years after that 1963 Supreme Court decision ... June 17, 1993 ... William Murray told a crowd of six thousand: *"My family's rejection of God was not intellectual. We did not remove God from America's schools because of separation of Church and State; we simply did not want to hear God's Word because it was contrary to the lives we lived."*⁴ It's been my experience and perspective that quite often professed atheism in an individual has a moral root, not an intellectual one. Not to over-simplify, but practical atheism often begins with a person saying, "No, God!" in some moral area of life, and then calamity inevitably results. Life just doesn't work well when you say, "No, God!" The resulting calamity (or calamities) often goes on to make the person bitter, not better ... bitter toward life in general and religion in particular.

It is not so much that God is vindictive and punishes us when we say, "No, God." The reality is that the painful consequences are the natural result of our having said, "No, God." In short, this is what is happening in Jeremiah's day. The people no longer listened to God, and we are told they are becoming really good at doing evil! Again, that's not something we want to get good at; these folks had apparently come to the point where they no longer even knew how to do good. No matter how smart we may think we are, no matter how much we think we can handle the consequences, we must believe and trust that God's perspective is better than ours and trust him and work at becoming good at doing good! God really does know how things work. He really is the Designer, the Architect, the Creator of life and He knows how things are supposed to function! He knows what it takes to live life that is full, enjoyable, a blessing to others and to ourselves, and He really does love us and wants the best for us.

So, it really is a foolish thing to say, "No, God!" It is not something we want to get good at.

⁴ *Easy Doesn't Do It*, Derric Johnson, Y.E.S.S. Press, c.1991, p. 61