

THINGS WE DON'T WANT TO GET GOOD AT

Sermon, September 11, 2022

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

It's hard to believe it has been twenty-one 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 a few years ago the copilot of the second plane, United Airlines Flight 175 (*a Boeing 767*), was the 1985 quarterback of the same college football team I played on during the mid-seventies at West Chester University. I did not know Mike Horrocks, as he was on the team ten years after I had played. After college he joined the Marine Corps and flew C-130s; after his military service he became a pilot for United Airlines. On September 11, 2001, he was the 35 year old father of two small children ... his daughter had just started fourth grade and his son started first; ¹ the family lived just two or three miles from my parents' home. The third airliner crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia; the fourth crashed into a field near in rural Shanksville, Pennsylvania after some 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 September 11 attacks were the deadliest terrorist act in world history. 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 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 and shameful attack on civilization. Included among the victims that day were 421 first responders, firefighters and police personnel, who had come to rescue people. Fifteen years later, that casualty toll was estimated to have more than tripled reaching 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. (*Other casualties: 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 had been diagnosed with cancer as a result of "exposure to toxins at Ground Zero."*)² According to The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, as of July 2021 a total of 7,057 U.S. military personnel had been killed in post 9-11 war operations giving their lives seeking to keep us safe from terror. They deserve to be remembered. (*Also, over 8,000 non-military contractors working for the US lost their lives in the two war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq.*) Tragically, there have been 30,177 suicides among U.S. service members and veterans of the post 9-11 wars; that's more than four times the number killed in battle.³

WE SHALL NEVER FORGET. One of our lectionary readings today is (*partially*) about not forgetting. Paul remembered and regretted the destruction and hurt he caused in his misguided religious zeal as a Pharisee of Pharisees. As I've mentioned when we've looked at the story of Paul's conversion before, 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 21st anniversary of an 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 hurting a whole lot of people around him as he persecuted the early church! He meant it when he wrote to Timothy that he was the foremost of sinners; he wasn't using hyperbole. He knew and remembered 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.

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 [Latest Figures | Costs of War \(brown.edu\)](#)

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. Yes, we are to be gracious; yes, we are to be ready to forgive ... but we are also to *remember* the gravity of the wrong. Where there is genuine repentance on the part of the offender, forgiveness is our obligation. But beware of forgiving and forgetting too much too quickly. 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 evil 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 and the practice of evil are things we don't want to get good at.

"My people are fools," God says through the prophet. Psalm 14:1 -- "*The fool says in his heart there is no God.*" You may remember that in the Hebrew text of that Psalm the words "there is" are not there. What the verse literally says is, "*The fool says in his heart, 'No God.'*" If one would just add a comma in the right spot (*as you may know, there are no punctuation marks in the original Hebrew text*), you would have "*The fool says in his heart, 'No, God!'*"

*The following was edited out on the spot due to time constraints; I include it here --: 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 when I was 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 professed atheism in an individual often 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 punishes us when we say, "No, God." The reality is that there are painful natural consequences when we violate and/or ignore God's good directives and say, "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 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