

Remembering Christ Within Us

Abbot Anthony of the fourth century Desert Fathers in Egypt is rumored to have said these words:

"Fish, if they tarry on dry land, die: even so people (members of the baptized) that tarry outside their church fall away from their community of faith. As a fish must return to the sea, so must we to our beloved church: lest it befall that by tarrying without, we forget the Christ within us."

I find myself continuing to try to cope with the tragic events of September 11. We do not live in a time or a culture or an economy that encourages us to remember the absolute necessity of the "Christ within." I have always loved the word "remember." Each time I read it, hear it, or use it, I envision the parts of a body that have been separated somehow mysteriously being "re-membered"- being put back together with the Holy alacrity. It is the kind of miracle that only a loving God can make happen.

My initial reaction to the terrorist attack was probably similar to yours- shock and disbelief. Watching on television, it looked like a Hollywood movie and it seemed unreal and unimaginable that such a thing was actually happening. But it happened, and it was real. My initial shock was followed by immense sadness and sympathy for the thousands of families, whose lives were so horribly and permanently affected. I, like many of you, personalized this - recognizing that it would take only minor changes in circumstances to have been in one of those buildings or one of those planes.

And then the personal stories started rolling in, that made the tragedy all too real- and even harder to handle. They were stories of unspeakable sadness and seemingly limitless courage. There was the wife who took a later flight to have breakfast with her husband on his birthday, and lost her life on a hijacked plane, calling her husband on a cell phone to say good-bye. There was the son who worked in the World Trade Center and called his mom to tell he was alright- only to have the phone connection drop in mid-sentence while the mother watched in horror as the building her son was in exploded. There were stories of brave rescue workers who, because of their courage and their speedy response to help their fellow brothers and sisters, were among the first to perish. It was all horrifying and so sad.

As the day progressed and the country continued to watch the story unfold, that initial sense of helplessness seemed slowly to be replaced by a stirring desire to do something helpful. Indeed, as people saw the magnitude of the tragedy and watched what others were doing, they began contemplating what they could be doing. I'm proud of you! I'm proud of St. John's Church! I'm proud of the many ways we have begun to reach out as a community of faith to others in need: by giving blood, money, gathering food, gloves, socks, underwear, and the like.

Recognizing that there are still much for us to do, we need to stop and ask where God may be in all of this. God is very present to all those who gaze upon the mystery of love, as well as those of us who doubt and question the Almighty. I took comfort, and I suspect you did as well, in the way the country came together in the aftermath of this tragedy. The bickering among the political parties and the trivial nature of some of the things we find so vexing in our lives faded away.

On Sunday evening, September 16, about 450 people from the community gathered together in prayer here at St. John's. They included the Mayor, Town Council, Superintendent of Schools, Chiefs of Police and Fire Departments, representatives from agencies like the Red Cross, and United Way, Sheriff's Office, a U.S. Marine (our own Bill Loften), community members, and members of Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities based in Central Jersey. We gathered to mourn the loss of those who have died and to celebrate the gifts of living. Over \$1,100 was collected at offering, already given to the Red Cross and the United Way.

The central theme of The Gospel is about solidarity-standing together in Christ-that good will overcome evil...light, peace, joy-these are the things that prevail in the kingdom of God.

Because we live in such a fragmented time and place it is much easier to believe that once something or someone torn apart (the lives of those who have been lost), nothing, absolutely nothing can put it back together again. If we are very blest, (and in indeed we are!) we will allow ourselves to see beyond death, fragmentation, loss, doubt and pain of what happened in Washington, rural Pennsylvania, and New York City, and know in our hearts the way in which God makes that "re-membering" happen everyday, every second of our lives, and in every place on the planet. But that openness on our part will not just mysteriously happen. It requires something from us. We must be careful, like the monks of Anthony's day, not to forget The Christ Within!

I believe Christ calls us (the Church) to "re-member" with each breath we take God's love for us and for the whole human family. Our calling is to gather together in Christ name, to help each other name those heartfelt emotions and feelings of pain, anguish, fear, hatred - as well as love, faith, and hope. When we allow ourselves to "re-member" and tell the story we allow ourselves to know that "re-membering" the Christ within us connects us, not only to God, but also to our brothers and sisters around the world.

As we contemplate God's place in the tragic events of September 11, and what that means to us as citizens, Americans and children of God, may we ever take to heart the boundless love of the almighty which surrounds us on every side. I close with the words spoken by Thomas Kelly at a church convention in Pennsylvania in 1928

"To you in this room who are seekers, to you young and old who have toiled all night and caught nothing, but who want to launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a draught, I want to speak as simply, as tenderly, as clearly as I can!! For God "can" be found. There is a divine center into which your life can slip, a new and absolute orientation in God, a center where you live with God and out of which you see life through new and radiant vision, tinged with sorrows and pangs, new joys, unspeakable and full of joy"

God is in our midst. Draw near and remember the Christ within us all. We all have the ministry of listening to one another before us, to help each other name those feelings and emotions, and the proclaim victory in Christ. I am you pastor. I am your priest. I love you! Know that I am with you in this terrible and anxious time. Come to church. Call me and I will be happy to sit with you to help, listen, and learn. God bless you and remember "The Christ within us"

Faithfully,

Father Ron⁺