Remembering 9/11 twenty years later

I was sitting in my office early that beautiful Tuesday morning trying to get a few things done before I had to leave school for a funeral of a recent grad. At 8:45 a.m., our Social Studies chair came into my office to let me know that a plane had gone into the North Tower of the World Trade Center buildings. I could not grasp the enormity of what I thought was a horrific accident and I sat for a moment and don't remember what I did next until 18 minutes later when he returned to tell me about another plane exploding into the South Tower and informing me that this is terrorism, and we are under attack. I met quickly with the other administrators and addressed the school community using the PA system. I explained what just transpired, led the school in prayer and suggested that students and teachers turn on the television and witness a very sad and unprecedented moment in our history. A set of twins came into my office to ask to use the phone as their father was at the harbor nearby there that day. One of our teachers was trying to contact her son who worked in one of the towers. I was trying to comfort all three. As I had to leave for the funeral, I told the vice principal to do what he had to do. As we were exiting the church at the end of Mass, I noticed girls from our sister school walking outside and knew immediately that the schools were dismissing.

When I arrived back at our school, the majority of the students were on their way home, save for those whose parents were on their way to pick them up. Another priest and I, along with a few student leaders, began organizing a peace march for that evening that would leave from the front of our school to a familiar park about 1.5 miles away. As the day unfolded, we learned about the attack on the Pentagon and the failed attempt to take down the Capitol Building due to the bravery of a few men who by this time had known that we were under attack and were not going to let their hijackers achieve their evil with their plane. Films since revealed that they selected a secluded place to rush the cockpit, so as to save other's lives. "No greater love has one then to lay down his/her life for one's friends." (John 15:13) For them, other Americans, would be victims if the plane tore into another building, suddenly became their friends, friends whom they would not meet in this life.

We had time to get candles, prepare a prayer service and get the word out. I cannot remember how many people began the procession but so many joined as we marched praying and singing. We were one of thousands of prayerful responses that evening to a tragedy that none of us had ever witnessed and was still unfolding. Somehow, we were all one that evening. The next days I was glued to the tv. I remember members of Congress coming outside the Capitol assembled as one singing a patriotic hymn. So many echoed the familiar refrain **"God Bless America!"** It was so omnipresent and palpable that I thought "how long will this continue before people object to using God's name?" Months later when I was in the area for a wedding, I went to the World Trade Center that was cordoned off by a chained fence. Signs were posted asking people not to write on the posts. They were all covered and about 99% of the messages included the refrain God Bless America.

Those of us of a certain age remember where we were on 9/11. We can tell our own stories. In upcoming months, various universities would honor fallen alumni on the cover of their next publication. Perhaps we knew someone who died in all the various places where hatred was carried out by 19 militants from the Islamic extremist group al Qaeda all under the name of a warped and woefully incorrect concept of the Almighty.

National Geographic has released a six-episode series *9/11: One Day in America*. In the first episode where you see the two planes crash into the twin towers, you hear an eyewitness exclaim at the horror **"There is no God."** Many may have uttered the same sentiment, but we know this not to be true. **God was on full display** in the various firemen, police, the first responders and thousands of volunteers who risked everything to save lives. One survivor trapped on the 89th floor, nine floors above where the plane entered the first tower, described not being able to open the door to the stairwell until four firemen opened it for her. She noted that these "good, brave souls" whom she called angels continued going up more floors into harm's way knowing they would never make it out alive. A factoid at the end of the first episode remarks that these four saved 70 lives that day! God was present in all those phone calls made on the planes with the same message of love to their spouses, parents, and relatives. God was present in the thousands of volunteers who immediately raced to the scene offering their service. God was in the various churches, restaurants and businesses that opened their doors to triage people, to feed them or to act as temporary morgues. God was in the volunteers from all states who lent their skills in conjunction with and relief for the local skilled professionals. Others wanted to volunteer but were turned away as there were too many present. Two of my sisters, both nurses, were in that group. The response was overwhelming and attested to goodness and love winning the day.

If God is all good and all that God created is good, how does something like 9/11 happen? Of all that God created, the only thing God wants back is us. God could have made us automatons where we move like robots with no option but to obey him. But love is a choice. God gives us the freedom to reject this invitation to a relationship. We call this free will. Apparently, God thought we were worthy of this gift to choose God and goodness. Theologically, we say that **evil does not exist** for God brings all things into existence, into being. To create evil would be a contradiction to who God is. What we call evil is really good corrupted, distorted or twisted. What could possibly be **the good distorted** in such a tragedy whose memory still tears us apart on this the 20th anniversary? Some may conjecture that in attempting to take down the center of commerce or finance, al Qaeda was trying to even the power imbalance in the world or to address a problem of greed that they perceived to dominate the USA. Other reasons may be raised, and my explanation may not satisfy you. In no way is it meant to excuse away this most horrific violence and show of hatred. What 9/11 teaches me is how far some are from understanding who God is and our inability to use well and correctly the gift of free will to love, to choose God, to fall madly in love with God that with God as our center, our being, our everything only good can issue forth.

Heroes from the events of 9/11, known to us and unknown, bring to mind this God, this goodness, and this love. One is Fr. Mychal Judge ofm, chaplain to the firemen, who was shown in the first episode of the National Geographic documentary walking outside the towers and praying with fire gear on as what else could he do? I believe he walked into one of the towers to anoint the fallen when debris fell on his head killing him instantly and he became "the first *certified* fatality" of 9/11. Read his story, even if on Wikipedia, as he was quite an amazing man. The image of the four or five men carrying his body out of the building has been called "the American Pieta."

Yet, staying with Fr. Judge I am reminded of another incident that shows hatred continues to rear its ugliness. Years after 9/11, I was teaching at my alma mater, Fr. Judge High School, which is named after the founder of the Trinitarian Sisters (Fr. Thomas Judge, CM) who gave the land to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to build a high school on its premise asking them to name the school after their founder. One day, members of Westboro Baptist Church (which is not affiliated with any Baptist denomination), picketed outside our school thinking it was named after Fr. Mychal Judge who was known to be gay. They are infamous for their anti-American, anti-gay, anti-Semitic, etc. hate speech. They love to protest at people's funerals. They protested at the funeral of Joe Biden's mother and most recently, at his son Beau's funeral. Why? Because they do not know God (though they ignorantly claim to) and hence do not know love and goodness.

But hatred along with evil has always been present before 9/11 and sadly since. It will continue until we have a deep, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Until he becomes the true center of our life, not much is going to change. Our selfishness and thirst for satisfying our personal wants and needs that just continue and grow into new ones to be satisfied in this endless cycle and quest for happiness so paralyze us from seeing the need to have Christ the center, the one who can enrich each day, give it true meaning and purpose. It's a conviction of the mind and heart that this Savior of the World wants and desires to be in a relationship with us. When we work to make this relationship the center of who we are, what we do, how we love and forgive, how we are loved and forgiven, then we begin to see goodness and ensure that we never corrupt or twist it into evil. Friends, there are too many other heartaches and tragedies that come from the imperfection of nature (floods, fires, devastating hurricanes and earthquakes, diseases, physical ailments, and infirmities) that cause such sorrow and loss that are above our control to contain or prevent them, why do we spread hatred and evil which we can control and contain?

On this anniversary of 9/11 and in light of other recent tragedies (loss of life in Afghanistan in the 20-year war, this pandemic, the increasing murder count in our cities across the nation, the list of African Americans senselessly killed, those aborted, those discarded on our streets, the elderly forgotten in nursing homes, those abused, mistreated and disrespected in any and every way), let us resolve again and renew our fervor in following **the greatest commandment** of loving our God with our whole heart, mind and soul (and our neighbor as well). Let us not forget that we belong to each other. May God Bless America and each one of us.

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