

Remembering

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
September 11, 2016

On this second Sunday in September our nation remembers something lost 15 years ago. The attack on U.S. soil, only the third in our nation's history, killed 3,000 and injured more than twice that many. The losses in terms of lives and property value has been estimated in the trillions of dollars and has changed the way we go about our business in some subtle and not so subtle ways. Travel is far less convenient and visiting friends in office towers in New York City can no longer be spontaneous. We have less privacy than ever before with the monitoring of digital communications and street cameras that record our movement around urban centers. National Security has a prominence in the budget that hadn't existed before. We live with these changes not fully understanding their implications and not always remembering why they exist.

2016 marks the 15th year when all the names of those who died will be read in a solemn ceremony at the World Trade Center and communities across the nation will mark the event in a variety of ways. As a nation, we remember in order not to forget. We remember friends and family who were innocent victims of a heinous mass murder. But we also remember as part of the healing process. While the pain may never completely subside I think it is fair to ask how long these services of remembrance will continue to contribute to that healing process.

We remember so as not to forget, so that we might heal and be whole once more. What is it that you remember about Tuesday, September 11, 2001? Do you remember that it was a perfect fall day? Do you remember the bright blue skies, comfortable temperatures with little humidity pointing toward fall rather than summer; do you remember? Were you glued to a television set as the nation watched the surreal images of the World Trade Center collapsing in gray and black clouds streaked in flame? Were you in contact with anyone who had been nearby within the first 24 hours? Do you remember what the church

or your community did to provide a place for people to grieve and reaffirm their common humanity? What is it that you remember most clearly 15 years ago? Have any of those images gotten blurry or been deleted or distorted?

It is important to acknowledge on this 15th anniversary of 9/11 that we also remember for the generations that follow. And indeed, it has been nearly a generation since that morning that seems for many as though it were just yesterday. But there is a growing cohort born after that day that has no memory and it is vitally important that we remember 9/11 with clarity so that its lessons will not be lost. I am thinking about the stories that get told around the dining room table and how important they are in shaping our culture for the future. As a nation we have not always done this well. It seems clear that the resurgence in racism and other forms of bias are largely attributable to what gets passed down from one generation to the next.

I had a startling reminder of that earlier this year as Jews and Catholics joined to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, a Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, promulgated by Pope Paul VI. *Nostra Aetate* says among other things "Indeed, the church believes that by His cross Christ, our peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in himself." The document also says "The church regards with esteem also the Moslems." Sitting at my table in the discussion group was a freshman at Iona College which sponsored the event. He remembered learning about *Nostra Aetate* in Catholic School but what had an even greater impact was what he learned about Jews on the playground from the other boys – and that had nothing to do with reconciliation or esteem. Breaking this cycle of hatred and prejudice means that we must remember fairly and accurately so that the next generation will not make the same mistakes.

Do you remember the blue columns of light that stretched up in the night sky as though the twin towers were still standing? Do you recall the ghostly quiet for those few days when the airports were completely locked down? Do you remember that six days after 9/11 President George W. Bush went to the Islamic Center of Washington DC hailing American Muslims as "friends" and "taxpaying citizens"? The New York Times reports that Mr. Bush went on to say: "These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it's important for my fellow Americans to understand that." "The face of terror is not the true face of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war." (NYT, Samuel G. Freedman, Sept. 7, 2012) Do you remember?

Do you remember that in the hours after the conflagration that churches and homes opened their doors to care for those who could not get home because public transportation was also shut down? Do you remember that those who were not injured walked miles in an effort to contribute blood to help those who might need it? Do you remember how in those initial hours and days that the world reached out to the United States as we had reached out to them so often to share our horror and grief and offer whatever assistance might be needed. Do you remember feeling with such strong conviction the goodness of humanity even in the darkness of those evil acts?

The world has gotten increasingly complex in the last decade and a half and speaking for myself there are times when I feel a bit lost; that the world may be going seriously mad. I worry that in this environment our ability to remember clearly has been warped; that subsequent events have sharpened our prejudices and we have lost that glimpse of goodness in those first days after 9-11. John Kerry who was then the junior Senator from Massachusetts said it well: "Remember the hours after September 11th when we came together as one to answer the attack against our homeland. We drew strength when our firefighters ran upstairs and

risked their lives so that others might live; when rescuers rushed into smoke and fire at the Pentagon; when the men and women of Flight 93 sacrificed themselves to save our nation's Capital; when flags were hanging from front porches all across America, and strangers became friends. It was the worst day we have ever seen, but it brought out the best in all of us."

May that be the memory we impart to the next generation; may that be the memory that finally heals the nation's wounds.

Amen