

September 12th, 2021
Year B; 16th Pentecost
Isaiah 50: 4-9a
Psalms 116: 1-8
Mark 8: 27-38

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we gather today on this weekend of remembrance for the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, I imagine many of you have been doing what I

have done this week, remembering where you were that day 20 years ago. The Richmond Times Dispatch has featured all week, folks recalling their experiences that morning, some in the heart of the attacks, and others at their kitchen tables far from the destruction.

September 11th, 2001 was a Tuesday, and I know that because we had an all-school chapel service that day marking the opening of school. The service was held outdoors each year and was brief, as the crowd of over 1000 included 4 ½ year-olds to senior faculty members. As the Lower School Chaplain my task was to direct, herd, and watch over all our young students and their harried teachers as they crossed the road to the worship site.

This opening school chapel service was a joyous and exhausting gathering, but the weather cooperated, and we did not lose track of any little ones. And by 8:40am the service had concluded and all the boys and their teachers were herded back to Lower School, and I was heading to my office to catch my breath.

I walked back with our new principal, Dave Menges, who had only a week of school under his belt. We chatted and marveled at the beauty of the blue sky that morning, and discussed plans for the day, and meetings we both would attend.

By the time we got back and were passing through the library, the first plane had hit the north tower, and a tv was on with teachers and older boys looking with concern and curiosity about this seeming accident.

As the next crashes occurred in dizzying succession, we quickly knew this was not an accident and kept the boys away from any televisions. But anxiety and fear were high, and teachers and parents with spouses and relatives in NY and at the Pentagon were terrified.

Dave, our new principal, had just moved his family to Richmond from

Greenwich CT and knew so many people who worked in New York city, including his brother, who he could not reach.

By 11am, I felt like it must be time to go home, like night had fallen.

That day, the whole week is both a hazy blur and vivid in my memory, with conversations and moments imbedded in my memory in the fog of disbelief, grief, and horror.

Within a day the kindergarteners were building towers and knocking them down, and building them again, struggling in their play to understand what had happened. The older boys in my Religion anguished over the questions of how anyone could do something so cruel? A bomb threat was made to our neighbors at the Jewish school. Though no bomb was found, we all felt the jittery fear of what was next.

By Friday, we joined the National Day of Mourning declared by President Bush. I struggled to know what to say, to be a comfort in the midst of my own questions and fears. Finally, only Mr. Rogers could offer any of us help.

You may know his wonderful story of talking to his own mother as a young boy, struggling to understand times of horror, and his mother telling him to focus not on the cruelty, but on the helpers, that God was there in the helpers.

By Friday of that week, we were all watching as those first responders, fire and police folks, continued their grim work at the World Trade Center site, going through the smoldering rubble, the air thick with smoke and ash. And we watched those helpers and prayed for them, and for all of us, stricken in our grief.

I remember reading that week, the musing of a famous comedian who asked,

will we ever be able to laugh again, and thinking no, we will not.

After our worship service, I went into the office where a tv had been placed and that had been on constantly since the attacks, available for adults who wanted an update, needed to see what was happening.

I had kept my composure all week, not breaking down at school, hugging and holding and comforting without my own grief overflowing.

As I took a moment to look at the tv after the service, I felt my own tears starting.

The blue skies of September 11th, had by Friday the 14th, dissolved into a steady grey rain in New York. The live coverage at Ground Zero, showed the fire fighters and police, in that drenching rain continuing their heartbreaking work of sifting through the rubble, looking for fragments of the almost 3000 who had died.

Music from the National Day of Mourning service in DC played as I watched the first responders work. The music was the Battle Hymn of the Republic:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on.*

*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.*

And I wept, and cried for all we had lost, all the fear, all the pain.

Our gospel lesson today, finds Jesus asking his close friends, first, an easy question:

“Who do people say I am?”

This question was easy because all they had to do was report what they had heard from others: some say you are John the Baptist, others say you are Elijah, or another of the prophets. Jesus’s friends must have felt pretty good, answered that one well.

But then Jesus asks them the real question:

“But who do YOU say I am?”

Uh oh, now we have to think, and ponder, and own what we believe, or do not believe.

Jesus goes on in this passage to tell the crowd with his disciples, what we are called to do if we claim Jesus as our brother, as our savior:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. “

One writer on this passage, pondered how small the crosses are that he chooses to pick up.

I know that my cross on September 11, 2001 was small, as exhausted as I was that week, that month, I went home each night to my husband and to

safety.

And I knew and was humbled that Friday, as I watched the fire fighters working in the rain at Ground Zero, that their cross was far larger, and now know their cross has lasted far longer.

As you likely know, those who worked days, weeks, months in the rubble, many have suffered serious illnesses from their determined and selfless work there. Many ordinary folks interviewed this week remembering 9/11 in New York, spoke of still being able to recall the smell of the air that day as they ran away from the towers, still able to remember the taste of the ash in their mouths.

The firefighters can still recall too, and still carry the scars of their selfless work there.

Were they all Christians? It doesn't matter, as their actions and fortitude, showed their faith and the cross they were willing to carry for all of us, and for each family looking for a fragment of their loved one.

A report I listened to this week interviewed a NY police officer who, with several others, were in an adjoining building at World Trade Center when the south tower fell. This officer and three others still spoke in disbelief that they managed to escape afterwards.

Holding onto each other in the darkness, they crawled out of the rubble and into the shrouded streets. But three other officers, just 20 feet away from them, did not escape. And this officer told of staying daily at Ground Zero, all the way, all the months, until the following spring, to show the way to where those three were buried, so their families could have peace in finding what was left of their bodies, to lay to rest.

None of us worked at Ground Zero for months risking our health and lives. But we can learn from them and look for the crosses we are called to carry.

You may be aware that the firefighters that did that heartbreaking and dangerous work 20 years ago have had to fight mightily to receive the benefits and healthcare they so desperately need to deal with the effects of their selfless work.

The firefighters and police deal now with higher rates of cancers and breathing problems:

“...about three-quarters of more than 15,000 Fire Department responders are now suffering at least one 9/11-related ailment, including 3,097 cases of cancer.” (FDNY World Trade Center Health Program)

The healthcare to cover these folks has been debated, avoided and funded periodically by politicians.

Finally, the comedian and New Yorker Jon Stewart took up his cross and eased his fame to advocate twice before Congress, for these firefighters and police to get the long-term healthcare they need.

And still today, work goes on to assure the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act remains funded. We can take up our small crosses, and learn more about how we care, and do not care, for those in our world who carry crosses for all of us.

Jesus asks each of us today: “But who do YOU say I am?”

Much for use to pray on and ponder today.

Let us pray:

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: On this twentieth anniversary of September 11, 2001, give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.