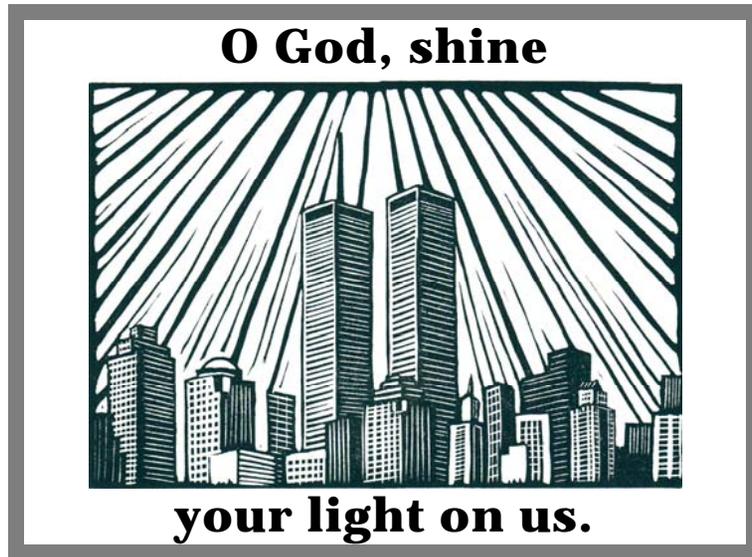


no faith – who will help to build a nation that reflects our very best. Courage, compassion, generosity, and sacrifice – these are values we have witnessed and remember on this day. Indeed, **THESE** are the stories that we must “Never Forget,” for though we might in time forget where we were and what we were doing ten years ago today, may we never forget God’s power to use us for good, even in the face of evil, including our own. **Amen.**



*Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done.
It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it;
drawing out the sting in the memory
that threatens to poison our entire existence.
It involves trying to understand the perpetrators
and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes
and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences
that might have conditioned them. . . .
By forgiveness we are saying,
here is a chance to make a new beginning.*

Desmond Tutu

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
September 11, 2011: Ten Years after Terrorist Attacks on the U. S.
(Proper 19, Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times . . . (as the forgiving king said to the servant who showed no mercy), "Should you not have had mercy . . . as I had mercy on you?"
Matthew 18:21-22, 33

Most of us will never forget where we were and what we were doing ten years ago today when terrorists crashed two planes into New York City’s World Trade Center. I remember that I was rushing off to work, when Michael – who had just heard the news in his car – called to tell me to turn on TV. I was already late, but when I flipped on the news and saw that haunting image of black smoke billowing from one of the Twin Towers, all other agendas left me. Shock set in, and I sank into a chair in stunned silence.

“There has to be some logical explanation,” I thought illogically, until moments later, a second plane – slamming into the South Tower – forever changed whatever illusion of security our country had. The most powerful nation on earth was suddenly vulnerable – a reality felt not only by us, but by the whole world. “Today, we are all Americans,” people around the globe were heard to say, just as the people of Chicago said, “Today, we are all New Yorkers.” It was a reminder of the bond and burden of our shared humanity – which we are all in this together.

In fact, in the days, weeks, and months that followed, there were many such reminders of the power of community. Some, for example, recalled the last words of loved ones, reaching out to family and friends as they faced the end. Likewise, there were gripping reminders of courage, compassion, generosity, and sacrifice – where seemingly ordinary men and women worked

together to help others. At St. Christopher's, the impromptu service we held that night brought people off the streets through open doors that welcomed strangers seeking strength and comfort in community.

Unfortunately, there were grim reminders of evil as well, as some extremists danced in the streets, threw candy to children, and congratulated terrorists on a job well done. Still, these reactions were met with outrage by most, inspiring strangers in London, Paris, Berlin, Nairobi, and even Tehran to light candles, offer prayers, display American flags, and play *our* national anthem. Such cities and thousands of other, identified instinctively with our country's pain and loss. I wonder, though, how many – including us – also identified with the capacity for sin, and its power to invoke the very evil we deplore.

Certainly, many understood the longing to lash out at evil enemies who wrong the innocent, deserving their wrath and God's. At the same time, this is precisely what terrorists do, lashing out at people and nations whom they judge – rightly or wrongly – to be responsible for their own ills. It's a slippery slope, since blame can feed resentment, which in turn, seeks its revenge. It's the opposite of the mercy that God invites, for as Jesus – in the words of the king in today's parable – challenges the merciless, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

He asks this of one who has been forgiven a great debt. The truth, though, is *ALL* of us are debtors – for ALL humankind has committed its share of violent acts/made its share of mistakes – including the United States. We are *ALL* in need of forgiveness. And yet not long after the terrible acts of violence brought against us ten years ago, our nation defined its official response to terrorism as war – a *decade* of war as it turned out – resulting tragically in far more innocent civilian deaths than on 9/11. Arguably, war was understandable, especially our response initially in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, demonstrations of our superior power and force have not reduced our risk of danger.

In fact, if anything, our response squandered the good will of brothers and sisters around the world whose initial compassion offered opportunities for deeper understanding and alliance. Following 9/11, the world advocated a collaborative pursuit of 9/11's small band of attackers until they were brought to justice. What it did not advocate, though, was the arrogance of a nation driven to deny its fear and vulnerability by denying its own character. After all, torture, abuse of civil liberties, religious bigotry, and two *unfunded* wars costing trillions of dollars were NOT – ARE not – who we are as a nation.

Moreover, such uncharacteristic acts have left our country and the world a more divided, dangerous, and dehumanized place – or so it often feels. It even feels at times as if the terrorists have won, at least in terms of economic damage to the U.S. and the world. Perhaps you think this yourself, and yet the good news is that – despite human sin – God's power is stronger than evil; despite our bent to blame, the story of Jesus urges forgiveness. As pastor and author William Willimon wrote recently in *Christianity Today*, "American Christians may look back upon our response to 9/11 as our greatest Christological defeat . . . When our people felt vulnerable, they reached for the flag instead of the cross."

The cross calls us to love. It urges repentance, mercy, and forgiveness. "How often should I forgive?" Peter asks Jesus in today's Gospel. "As many as seven times?" No, says Jesus, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." What he means is, keep on forgiving, because God keeps on forgiving us. "Stop trying to settle the score," says Jesus. "Stop counting the cost," which mercifully is a response we also witnessed in the wake of 9/11 and continue to witness still. Many people sacrificed their very lives for others in the face of terrorist attacks; and many work together today to create communities of love and peace.

The world needs such communities – of those willing to, "Love our neighbor as ourselves." It needs communities willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters of all faiths – or of