“What Do We Say to All of This?”


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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 12, 2021, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 19, dedicated to Fr. Mychal Judge, OFM and to all the men and women who died in the twin towers in NYC, the Pentagon, and aboard Flight 93 in Shanksville, PA on September 11, 2001, to all the men, women and children who have lost their lives in the past 20 years because of wars and terror created in the aftermath of 9/11, to all the first responders and soldiers on 9/11 and in all the years that followed who have saved lives and brought hope to this world, to all survivors of 9/11 and the wars that followed and always to the glory of God!

“What Do We Say to All of This?”

Proverbs 1:20-33, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Robert Emmett Judge was born in Brooklyn, NY May 11, 1931, the only son of immigrants from County Leitrim, Ireland. Born into the Great Depression to immigrant parents, his early years were hard – made harder by his father’s death at six. To support his family, young Robert went to work shining shoes in New
York City’s Penn Station. When he finished at Penn Station, he would cross the street and visit St. Francis of Assisi Church. Seeing the Franciscan friars care for people, he later said, “I realized that I didn’t care for material things... I knew then that I wanted to be a friar.”

The Franciscans eventually took him in and educated him. As a Franciscan friar and a Catholic priest, Robert’s name changed to Father Mychal Fallon Judge. Mychal spent his life serving the poor and working-class people of Boston and East Rutherford, NJ, but mostly Brooklyn and Manhattan. Fr. Mychal was well known in New York for ministering to those who were homeless and the hungry, recovering alcoholics, people with AIDS, the sick, the injured, and grieving, immigrants, gays and lesbians, and those alienated by society.

He once gave the winter coat off his back to a homeless woman in the street, later saying, “She needed it more than me.” When he anointed a man dying of AIDS, the man asked him, “Do you think God hates me?” Judge picked him up, kissed him, and silently rocked him in his arms, saying quietly, “God loves you.”

As he cared for the poor, he also battled his own alcoholism. In 1978, thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous, Mychal became clean and sober and dedicated his daily life to support other alcoholics in their battles with the addiction. In addition, he battled the Catholic Church as he defended gay and lesbian sisters and brothers through Dignity and other LGBT ministries. Fr Mychal often asked, “Is there so much love in the world that we can afford to discriminate against any kind of love?”
In his final ten years of life, Fr. Mychal Judge was a chaplain to the New York City Fire Department where he offered encouragement and prayers at fires, rescues, and hospitals, and counseled firemen and their families, often working 16-hour days. One firefighter said, “His whole ministry was about love. Mychal loved the fire department and we loved him.”

It was as a firefighting chaplain that Fr. Mychal died in the North Tower Lobby at the World Trade Center when the neighboring South Tower collapsed at 9:59 a.m., on September 11. The collapse sent debris crashing through the North Tower lobby, killing many inside, including Fr. Mychal Judge, whose cause of death was blunt force trauma.

On 9/11, Fr. Mychal Judge was designated as “Victim 0001” and thereby recognized as the first official victim of the attacks. Although we all know others had been killed before him, including the crews, passengers, and hijackers of the first three planes, and occupants of the towers and the Pentagon, he was the first certified fatality because he was the first body to be recovered and taken to the medical examiner.

Just before the moment he was struck in the head and killed, Judge was repeatedly praying aloud, “Jesus, please end this right now! God, please end this!”

When his body was extracted from the dust, the smoke and the glass, five men lifted Fr. Mychal and carried him to St. Peter’s Catholic Church where they laid him, at peace, at the foot of the altar.
Following his death, news broke that Fr. Mychal was gay and in a committed loving relationship with Al Alvarado. To this day, there are those in the Catholic Church who want to bury this truth of his life and love. Most others say we should celebrate this – more importantly – most of us believe – Mychal Fallon Judge should be canonized as a true saint of the church and that September 11th should forever be his Saint’s Day. The beautification process for Franciscan saint began earlier this year. Thanks be to God for Fr. Mychal Judge – victim 0001.

Although Mychal Judge was “Victim 0001,” the death toll on 9/11 would finally be known as 2,996 victims, plus 19 al-Qaeda terrorists. Among the dead were 343 NYC firefighters and another 60 police officers killed. In addition, there were 25,000 injured and the whole nation and world turned upside down.

Since September 11, 2001, at least 801,000 lives have been lost in the major war zones of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq – including the deaths of 7,070 American soldiers, over 3,010 American civilians with another 56,400+ wounded. Another 30,177 American soldiers have died by suicide since 9/11 – four times more than the 7,070 who died in combat. More than half a million innocent, civilian children, women and men have died in the cross fire of war since 9/11.

In addition, over 2,900 more first responders have died since 9/11 from cancers related to the toxic clean-up operations. This war on Terror has cost tens of trillions of dollars as well and has also created many millions of refugees of war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to flee for survival since 9/11.
And finally, let us remember in the closing days of our final extrication from Afghanistan – 13 US Marines and 60 Afghans were killed in the suicide bombing at the Kabul airport on August 26th – just 17 days ago.

Sadly, Victim 0001 has been joined by close to one million more souls since 8:46 a.m. on 9/11/2001 when the first plane flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center complex. Each and every one of them was a child of God. Each and every one of them was beloved by God and someone in this world.

Evil unleashed pain on 9/11. And the pain that was unleashed in our land also effected and afflicted many people of color, immigrants and especially our Muslim neighbors here and across the globe who then and continuing to this day have faced hatred and distain simply because they pray to God by the name of Allah. I have held them in their pain. I have seen their tears. I have heard their cries for justice. They are good and faithful and loving. They hurt, too.

In the words of the old African-American spiritual, “sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” I ask for you to pause in silence this morning and remember in love, Victim 0001 and all who have been killed and wounded, grieved and stricken, sickened unto death and forever impacted by September 11, 2001.

May we always remember this day and vow to end this evil madness in our world. Silence…

If September 11th was “Day One” of the world’s changing in many of our lives, September 12 was Day Two. Some of you remember September 12, 2001 in this sanctuary. In the book, First Sunday:
Spiritual Responses to the 9-11 Attacks, published 10 years ago, I told the story as an introduction to the sermon I delivered in this pulpit, Sunday, September 16, 2001, a Sermon entitled, “Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops it!” Here is what I said about September 12, 2001:

“On September 12, 2001 the city of Columbus gathered in an interfaith service in our sanctuary. More than one thousand people came downtown that night to worship with people of all faiths and no faith at all. They came to weep and hold on to each other. While a deep sense of the evil which had struck at the heart of our world 30+ hours before was present, an even deeper sense of the light of God shone in the hearts of the 1,000 people gathered in our sanctuary that night. It was a moment of sheer epiphany as God’s light overcame evil once again!”

It truly was a moment of sheer epiphany. I will never forget the highly enlightened Tibetan Buddhist priest in his orange robes walking down the center aisle in this packed sanctuary. He came to me, looked in my eyes and said, “all will be well.” And it was. The children of God who had lost other children of God in our human family stayed into the night praying and singing and loving one another.

A few days later, I read this prayer, this poem entitled, “When the World Spins Crazy,” by Walter Brueggemann, which he prayed at the Lay School of the Pentateuch on September 17, 2001. It is now found in his book, Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann.
When the World Spins Crazy

By Walter Brueggemann

When the world spins crazy,
spins wild and out of control
spins toward rage and hate and violence,
spins beyond our wisdom and nearly beyond our faith,
When the world spins in chaos as it does now among us…
We are glad for sobering roots that provide ballast in the storm.
So we thank you for our rootage in communities of faith,
for our many fathers and mothers who have believed and trusted
as firm witnesses to us,
for their many stories of wonder, awe, and healing.
We are glad this night in this company
for the rootage of the text,
for the daring testimony,
for its deep commands,
for its exuberant tales.
Because we know that as we probe deep into this text…
  clear to its bottom,
we will find you hiding there,
we will find you showing yourself there,
speaking as you do,
governing,
healing,
judging.
And when we meet you hiddenly,
we find the spin not so unnerving,
because from you the world again has a chance
for life and sense and wholeness.
We pray midst the spinning, not yet unnerved,
but waiting and watching and listening,
for you are the truth that contains all our spin. Amen.

It is truly “the rootage of the text” that calls us once again clear to its bottom. The Text calls us home. In Proverbs, Wisdom, which is always portrayed as a female figure, cries out to us in distress – from the depths of Wisdom sorrow. These ancient words written over 2500 years ago, cry out about human intransigence and willfulness. They are not the usual words about sin and injustice. Rather, she cries about the particular offenses of “being simple,” of “Scoffing” at people, of “hating knowledge” (and I would add – hating science in today’s world). While God has placed graciousness and goodness at the disposal of Israel’s women and men, and God has created a world of order and coherence and love – people respond with foolishness – and conspiracy theories that mock God and the beauty of God’s ways in this world.

Are we sure these words weren’t written this morning? I hear the echoes of Father Mychal’s final prayer in the words of Wisdom’s cry: “Jesus, please end this right now! God, please end this!”

The wisdom of Proverbs - “the rootage of the text” – always takes us deeper in the soil of the soul. Wisdom’s final observation – as it always is – has a positive nature. Waywardness and complacency kill simpletons and fools because God’s truth is secure and alert and
anchored by women and men who listen to God’s promises and “are at ease – Without the dread of disaster” (Proverbs 1:33).

James turns the soil of the soul even more when he reminds us that “the tongue is a fire” which can either enlighten the world or burn it to the ground. Which will it be for you? Will you use your tongue on this day to disparage someone else? Will you use it to divide? To destroy? Will you use it for rumors and useless and damaging chatter? Or will you use your tongue to uplift, to alleviate pain, to celebrate God and to spread the joy of the Good News of the Love of Jesus Christ? Will your tongue heal or hurt? Will it unify or divide? Will it proclaim or poison?

Do you see how the rootage of the text takes us deeper when the world spins crazy? To paraphrase Walter, when we probe the text… clear to its bottom, we will find God hiding there. We will find God showing Godself there. We will find God speaking, governing, healing, judging – at the deepest parts of the text.

And Jesus never disappoints us when we get to the bottom of the text! There he is in Mark 8:27-38 calling us to discipleship – which is the deepest place of love which we will ever encounter. In discipleship, we learn to pick up his cross and follow him. In discipleship, we learn to lay down our lives for others.

It was this spirit of discipleship that led hundreds of New York Firefighters up the stairs and into the fire in the twin towers on 9/11. They saved over 20,000 lives that day and saved 11 people from the rubble in the days that followed. It was that spirit of discipleship that caused Mark Bingham and the passengers of Flight 93 to fight to the death and caused the plane to crash into an empty field two miles from a school which had all the children in that part of Somerset
County K-12 in the building. The FAA said at 563 miles an hour on impact it was 2 seconds and one hillside away from landing on the school and in the town. That is discipleship. That is heroism.

When Jesus says, “follow me,” this is what it looks like in the face of terror.

You see, God’s text always takes us deeper.

May we always live in the deep rootage of the text.

So, what do we say to all of this? Here is your answer – in the words of the Apostle Paul, “if God is for us, who can be against us?”

With this I close… Each morning, Victim 0001, Fr. Mychal Fallon Judge would rise and start his day on a prayer bench in his home. May this prayer guide you this morning and in the days ahead:

“Lord, take me where you want me to go,
Let me meet who you want me to meet,
Tell me what you want me to say and
Keep me out of your way.”

Amen.