

# *“When the World Changed”*

*24th Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*Psalm 14, Jeremiah 4:11-12; I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10*

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*September 11, 2016*

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 11, 2016, 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time and Proper 19, dedicated to the over victims of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in NYC, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 which crashed in Stonycreek Township near Shanksville, PA, to Ed Solis, David Kirker, Joe Baszynski who have served our nation from our congregation and to the members of this church who have had sisters and brothers serve and to all who have lost their lives or their faith in the War on Terror since 9/11 and always to the glory of God!

***“When the World Changed”***

*Psalm 14, Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; I Timothy 1:12-17;  
Luke 15:1-10*

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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.

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At 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, five hijackers crashed American Airlines Flight 11 into the northern façade of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. 17 minutes later another five hijackers crashed United Airlines 175 into the

southern facade of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Five hijackers flew American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon at 9:37a.m. and at 10:03 a.m., United Airlines Flight 93 crashed on a plateau just outside Shanksville, PA as the passengers fought four hijackers for control of the plane which was believed to be headed for Washington DC – either the White House or the Capitol.

**In one hour and 17 minutes our world changed.**

2,996 innocent human beings from 90 different nations, plus 19 hijackers mostly of Saudi Arabian origin died that day. In New York, 343 firefighters, 72 law enforcement officers died trying to rescue people at Ground Zero – the World Trade Center – many of them running into the burning building when at least 20,000 people were exiting and coming down the steps out the towers. At the Pentagon, 55 military personnel died along with 72 civilian employees. 2526 casualties on 9/11 on the opening day of our War on Terror were civilians.

For 15 years we have been fighting the War on Terror – a global war with global economic and military impact. Directly or indirectly, this war has touched every nation, every person and every religion on our planet. We have all lost so much in this

war. At least 6,900 soldiers have died in this war. Another 57,000 have been casualties of war. Of those 57,000, too many have taken their own lives in their struggle in the aftermath of war.

But, how do you calculate the human costs of the War on Terror? Last Spring, in report entitled, *Body Count: Casualty Figures after 10 Years of the 'War on Terror'*—Physicians for Social Responsibility, Physicians for Global Survival, and the Nobel Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War concluded that this number is staggering, with at least 1.3 million lives lost in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan alone since the onset of the war following September 11, 2001.

However, the report notes, this is a conservative estimate, and the total number killed in the three countries “could also be in excess of 2 million, whereas a figure below 1 million is extremely unlikely.” Furthermore, the researchers did not look at other countries targeted in the War on Terror - including Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Syria, and beyond.

Even still, the report states the figure “is approximately 10 times greater than that of which the public, experts and decision makers are aware of and propagated by the media and

major NGOs.” In Iraq, at least 1 million lives have been lost during and since 2003, a figure that accounts for five percent of the nation's total population. This does not include deaths among the estimated 3 million Iraqi refugees, many of whom were subject to dangerous conditions during the winter of 2014. (The researchers identified direct and indirect deaths based on UN, government, and NGO data, as well as individual studies. While the specific number is difficult to peg, researchers say they hope to convey the large-scale of death and loss. The Report was released in May 2015 by the three above mentioned groups).

There are many numbers that have been put before you today. **But, we all know, numbers don't tell the whole story.** In this war, our soldiers have born the greatest burden. The effects of this war go on as a small number of men and women from our total population have fought this war for us - most of them going into Iraq and Afghanistan on two, three four or more missions. They have carried the burden of the battle. They carry the wounds, the scars and the memories with them. They are amazing and deserve our thanks and all the help we can offer as they return and rebuild their lives. (I added a special thanks at 11a.m. to Ed Solis!).

On September 11, 2001, the horrors and the heroes, the images and the impact shaped our lives – from that point on – in ways that we can never fully realize. For example, over the past 15 years, my relationships to Muslims, Jews, Christians and secular people here at home and across the globe have been changed in ways I never would have imagined possible before the four planes in New York, Washington and Shanksville, PA destroyed thousands of lives and shattered and shaped millions **of others' lives**. Rather than isolate and separate from our sisters and brothers of Muslim faith, many of us have engaged and developed deeper and meaningful relationships with them. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, we might not have thought to do that so intensely and purposefully.

If you were not here 15 years ago, you may not know that on September 12, 2001 in this sanctuary was packed with more than 1,000 people as people came downtown to First Church for an interfaith service of prayer. They were people of all faiths (and I mean 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 **hung over us, an even deeper sense of God's power and light** shone in the hearts of the 1,000 people gathered in the sanctuary that night. It was a moment of sheer epiphany as **God's light overcame evil once again!**

Many of us have committed ourselves to form deeper relationships and deeper faith connections with those who are not Christians since the tragic events of 9/11. I am only one among you in this effort. Out of the ashes of hate and evil has risen the hope of better interfaith understanding. A spirituality of hope has come from the despair of 9/11. Of course I see that this spirituality is not fully formed across our nation and across our world. My name is not Pollyanna and I am not an ostrich with my head in the sand. But, I do believe that relationships and growing understandings and experiences with Muslims, Jews, and other sisters and brothers of Christian faith – not to mention all the other world religions - will bring us closer to one another.

## **Our world changed on 9/11/2001.**

For my parent's generation, the pivotal moment of definition came with the attack on Pearl Harbor in which 2,700 were killed. For my children's generation, 9/11 shaped their lives and the understandings of other people. When the world changed, I wanted my children to see one place in which the world changed.

On Monday, October 8, 2001 – 27 days after passengers of Flight 93 fought their terrorist attackers and crashed their

plane just outside the tiny town of Shanksville, PA in Somerset County - Sarah, Daniel and I stopped there. We were returning from eastern Pennsylvania where I had preached the day before in my home church in Lansdale, PA. We stopped for 90 minutes to listen, to learn, to mourn, to pray.

In Shanksville, we were told of faith that makes us well. There was an Assembly of God pastor, a woman, who lived in the Mustard Seed house, just down the street from Ida's Food Market. She was not named to me, I'm not sure why, but it was Ida herself who told me that the pastor, during and after what happened in Shanksville, sat on her porch. Her ministry of making people well was to be present to the workers, to the volunteers, to the family members who came across those hills to see where their loved ones died. Her ministry and her faith made them feel better.

We met a man in the village who said to me, *"For three weeks, we served over 250 meals, three times a day. Do you know that's more food than the people around here eat in 10 years?"* And he added, *"And it was our privilege and we had help from so many that the Lord sent to us."*

And then there was Mrs. Tilton, the principal of the Shanksville/Stoney Creek School, as I stood in her office said,

“They did more than save the White House.” We looked out of her window, across the hill, the hill not the hills, half a mile away across the next ridge where the plane crashed. It was headed in its direction and on its trajectory straight for the Shanksville/Stoney Creek School where children Kindergarten through Twelfth grade attend. *“Over 500 children, all of the children in this part of Somerset County go to school here.”* Mrs. Tilton said, *“I’ve been told, just two seconds later that plane was on this building. They not only saved the White House, they saved all the children in this part of Somerset County.”*

Principal Tilton gave Sarah and Daniel buttons on that bright Monday morning. The buttons said, “Remember, Rebuild, Resolve – Shanksville/Stoney Creek School System.” These were buttons that she and the children gave to spouses and children of those who lost loved ones on Flight 93 who made their way through the winding roads of Somerset County to the village. She said, *“When family and children of the deceased on that flight come to Shanksville, school stops. We gather round those who’ve lost so much, they come down for assemblies to be with those who come to grieve. Our children are Angels of Mercy. They are learning to be compassionate and to be thankful. That is our curriculum now: Compassion and Gratitude. We are sharing faith in difficult times.”*

We stopped and knelt and prayed on the hill above the school where Flight 93 crashed. Tree tops had been severed from flying plane pieces and a hole in the earth was evident, but for the most part, with the site cleaned-up in the aftermath, it was very peaceful. Cut flowers and bouquets were everywhere wilting in the early morning October sun. Pictures of loved ones in a make shift memorial were laid on the edge of farmland on this plateau above the town. There was an eerie peace – for a moment – in a world which had changed forever.

In Luke's gospel today, we are given two parables about finding what is lost. There is the lost sheep and the lost coin which are sought, discovered and returned. Celebration ensues! God's love and grace is uplifted in the words of Jesus, "when just one sinner repents."

I pray on this 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 that we seek, find and then rediscover what has been lost in the world shattering events and the wars that have followed. We need to find what has been lost in our hearts. With so much bitterness, sarcasm, lying, cheating, hatred, violence and evil unleashed in this world, it is even more important each hour of each day that we reflect God's love, God's grace, God's heart of gratitude and thanksgiving, God's peace, God's compassion and God's kindness.

We need to have faith which uplifts and carries us through troubled times. In the words of Principal Tilton spoken to Sarah, Daniel and me 15 years ago, *“We need to gather round those who’ve lost so much, be angels of mercy, and learn to be compassionate and to be thankful.”* We need to find lost faith and claim it and cling to it. For it is through our faith that God will deliver us in difficult times. Amen.

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