

"Forgiving Those Who Trespass Against Us" – Matthew 18:21-35
September 11, 2001 (The Day the World Changed)

Doug: Ten years ago today (tomorrow), I was sitting in my office in St. John Lutheran Church in Beatrice, Nebraska. My secretary came to my office saying she had received a phone call saying that a plane had flown into one of the twin towers in New York City and that we should turn on a television. We did. We watched the second plane fly into the second tower, not believing what we were seeing.

We put the word out that our chapel was open for prayer as we gathered that night for a spontaneous prayer service.

Today, I've asked long time Divinity member and 30 year Cleveland fireman, Bruce Ryan, to share this sermon in dialogue. After listening to Bruce's speech at his daughter, Katie's wedding reception this summer in describing his love for his 3 daughters, I knew Bruce would spiritually move us on this 10th anniversary of 9/11.

Bruce: Not only the United States of America was affected, but yes, the entire world. Some countries danced in the streets in celebrations, while others, like Germany, France, and England mourned the attack in support of the USA.

- Where were you a decade ago?
- What were you doing?
- How did you react?
- How has this date in history changed your life?

These are questions I have been asked to answer today. I am sure most people here today can remember this day like it was yesterday.

I had been recently promoted to Lt. on the Cleveland Fire Department, and like most new officers, I was assigned to the Fire Training Academy, on Lakeside by the famous dead man's curve.

I was teaching a class on thermal imaging cameras, when a firefighter came into the classroom and said a plane just hit the World Trade Center.

As most people believed, we also thought it was a terrible accident. We turned on the news and watched.

17 minutes later, the South Tower was hit and that is when we all realized this was no accident, but some sort of attack.

Soon after the second plane hit the South Tower, we were notified to be on standby.

About 20 minutes later, all the air space was shut down.

About 20 minutes after that, the Pentagon was hit by another plane. The time now was about 09:45 a.m.

I was ordered to send all firefighters back to their stations, and round up any firefighting equipment around the academy. We were to place all equipment in the couple of vans we had and make some sort of response vehicles.

While outside (remember, I am by the lake), I looked up in the air and saw a plane passing over the lake and turning around. I thought it was a late plane being grounded, but as it turned out it was United Flight 93 that was taken over by heroes and crashed in Shanksville, PA.

I remember still being amazed and thinking this really can't be happening... it's a bad dream... but no one will ever wake up... as it's not a dream... it's a reality.

I remember watching the towers collapse, knowing everyone was not evacuated in time.

I knew my brothers in safety service were in the two towers doing their job.

We sat by the T.V., helpless, and watching this tragedy get worse and worse; what are we going to do? What will happen next?

We set up camp at the training academy as all instructors were told, we're not going home. Red Cross brought in cots and we were now an extra fire station with our make-shift response vehicles.

We had no idea what to expect next. Will Cleveland also be a target?

Our nation was compromised. We all knew this day could happen, but never believed it would.

The cries, the panic, the tumbling of the towers, are all visions that will never be released from our minds.

- Where were you?
- What were you doing?
- How did you react?
- How was your life changed?

I'm sure many here have personal stories and maybe had friends and family members in or around the towers that day.

Doug: As we remember 9/11, it is difficult to hear this weekend's gospel message in Matthew. Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving slave to remind his followers that God forgives our sins – but only if we forgive those who sin against us.

We pray and we pray and we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

In the parable, a king tortures a slave who refuses to show mercy to a fellow slave. In v. 35, Jesus promises, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

On this day, we ask questions. Ten years after the 9/11 attack have we forgiven those who sinned against us?

What does forgiveness mean in the context of war or military action?

Where is the link between our willingness to forgive and the forgiveness we hope to receive from God?

How can we pursue reconciliation with those who have done so much violence to us? Is there any hope for reconciliation after so much violence on 9/11 and the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that came after it?

Bruce: All in all, there were about 3,000 victims: 2,606 in the World Trade Center; 125 in the Pentagon; 246 passengers in the 4 planes. A total of 411 emergency workers – of those 343 were firefighters, 60 police, and 8 paramedics.

I believe all that died, died for their country, and all are heroes.

At the time of the attack there was an estimated 17,400 civilians in the World Trade Center. Could it have even been worse?

I remember in the next couple of days firefighters from all over the country packed up and went to New York to help in any way they could. They went through the tunnels of rubble hoping to find people alive.

I remember FDNY local calling Cleveland Fire and asking to spread the word out not to send anymore firefighters. They wanted to do this themselves; not out of greed, but out of pride. They also wanted to find their own brothers. They said they will call us when they are too exhausted and need our relief.

Many firefighters from Ohio responded when needed, along with many civilians.

We established a special bond with FDNY and shortly after they were totally exhausted, our union invited many of them and their families to Cleveland for a getaway weekend and Browns game in Cleveland. Their reactions and gratitude was priceless.

After 911 I found many people showing gratitude to myself and all safety forces. This bothered me as I did nothing. I felt I was not worthy of any praise. But the United States population showed gratitude towards all uniformed public safety workers. This is a way the population thanked the New York safety workers. This was widely expressed, because of the risk taken, and high death total. We became a symbol of what FDNY did.

Doug: Of course, Bruce is right. Often times it takes a crisis or a catastrophe to move us to affirm and thank those who serve and protect us, whether it be our firemen, police, or our sisters and brothers serving in the military. Rather, our tendency is to criticize one another, even our own family members and co-workers. It has always been difficult for us to learn how to love, support, and forgive even our closest friends, let alone our enemies.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian message when Peter comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as 7 times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you 77 times."

Even on the cross, Jesus calls on God to forgive his executioners. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

That kind of radical forgiveness is never easy, especially when we are faced with something as awful as 9/11, which has forever changed our lives as it so radically changed Bruce's life.

Bruce: How did this date in history affect my career on the Cleveland Fire Department?

- Let the training begin.
- On January 24, 2003, Homeland Security, a department concerned with protecting American homeland, and American citizens, was established by the United States Government.
- Any training we wanted with WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) we got.
- As a member of the Cleveland Hazardous Material Unit, I was sent for much training to prepare in case of another terrorist attack.
- The United States had a huge budget to further train their safety forces in different forms of terrorist attacks.

Some of the training I was honored to receive:

1. A week at the Nevada test site for radiation, detecting and dirty bomb training (this is where the atomic bomb was tested)
2. A week in Aniston, Alabama, at a retired Army base (Fort McClellan) training with live nerve agents.
3. Many WMD concept and incident classes.
4. WMD sampling techniques.
5. Emergency response classes to domestic biological incidents.
6. Many decontamination scenarios with National Guard and Coast Guard.
7. We now have bio-detection labs for white powder on our unit.

As you can see, my career was greatly affected by 911.

Besides safety forces being affected, all citizens have been affected.

In 2001 the USA Patriot Act was put into effect which gave law enforcement agencies search and surveillance powers.

Anyone fly since 911? Do they have more restrictions? Does anyone look around the plane with any prejudice, wondering if any Islamic military group is on board?

If so, this is a normal reaction to the compromise of our country.

I remember stopping at Station 54 at Times Square and talking with a veteran Captain. This was about 10 months after 911. When I told him I was a Cleveland Firefighter he took me to the back of the station. He showed me a door with Engine 54 on it. He explained that this is all that remains of Engine 54. He also said that this is his new crew, having to replace his old one. He stated he is worried about the new firefighters as many on the job only have one year experience.

Our next stop was to Ground Zero. Once in the area I talked with a firefighter in an ambulance and asked him some questions. He put us in the back of the squad and gave us a ride and tour of the area. This was one of the most emotional days in my life. We went to St. Paul's Chapel, which is across from Ground Zero. This chapel was a refuge for workers and a First Aid Station used on 911 and during the months after.

The fence along the chapel was a shrine of grief and memorial with flowers, notes, flags, and photos, many photos of victims of the attack asking if you have seen the person in the picture. Safety forces hung shirts from their hometown departments as a symbol of solidarity. Many people were around, but not a word was spoken... the silence was very powerful and respectful.

Last year my family and I visited again; time Station 10 at Ground Zero, or as New Yorkers now call it the World Trade Center site; they did not like the term Ground Zero.

Station 10 is now rebuilt and reopened. For me it was great to see. A plaque on the building has the firefighters; names on it that gave their lives to hopefully save others on the horrific day. Firefighters that visit from other departments leave their department's patch at a plaque as a sign of brotherhood and solidarity.

The signs of brotherhood I talked about in the safety forces is just a small example of what was shown by the whole country and the world in the past 10 years.

We must stick together and not let anyone take our freedom from us.

What were you doing? Where were you? How did you react? How did this date change your life?

Think about this today and always remember September 11, 2001.

Doug: May the peace of God...