

The Things that Really Matter

Romans 14:1-19

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 11, 2011

Ten years ago, I was sitting in a pastoral staff meeting at the Lancaster Church of the Brethren when our secretary interrupted the meeting with the news that an airplane had flown into the World Trade Center. From that moment, a day that was already full became even more so.

September 11, 2001, was a defining moment in my ministry. From the real-time processing of the events of that day alongside my mentors and ministerial colleagues, to the necessity of continuing on with congregational responsibilities while most of the nation was glued to their TVs, from the ponderous responsibility of offering the pastoral prayer on the Sunday following the attacks, to the weighty responsibility of helping youth to process, understand, and respond in the months that followed, my own experience of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was inseparably linked to my pastoral formation, and vice versa.

As I have approached this anniversary weekend, I have been thinking a lot about those days in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Again I find myself in a position of needing to say something of import about the intersection of our faith with such a transformative and watershed moment in our national history and collective memory. With many of you, I have been reading and watching and hearing the stories and recollections of people around the country that have been dominating our media in recent days.

Through it all, one memory and one image kept coming to my mind. It was the headline from the French newspaper *La Monde* on September 13, 2001 that read “We are all Americans.” I don’t remember where or when I was first exposed to it that week, but I do remember that it left an emotional impression on me, as a representation of the outpouring of international sympathy and solidarity that I saw and felt at a time of national tragedy and conflicted personal emotions. For a brief time, the world held our country in an embrace of care and concern, and for a brief time, our nation was united as one in shared grief and shock.

It did not last very long. By the time I entered volunteer service the following year, I worked alongside a Belgian young adult whose disdain for America was palpable, even as he lived and worked in the country, and I knew his feelings were not unique. During that year, the US began beating the drums of war on our way to Iraq. Those were the days of “freedom” fries, “freedom” toast, and even “freedom” ticklers. For the country that had so recently declared its solidarity with us in our mourning, we felt a need to distance ourselves from its influence even in our food choices, simply because they had the audacity to refuse to give our country a blank check to wage war in Iraq.

Today, the national unity and the international solidarity that were experienced in the days and weeks following the September 11 attacks seem like a distant memory. Our country is bitterly divided along polarized party lines that only seem to be getting more entrenched, and our standing and reputation in the global village has been severely battered. And while we could explore many possible reasons and contributing factors for these realities, I want to very briefly

and simply draw our attention to our scripture reading for this morning, and ask what message it might have for us this morning.

Paul was writing to a Christian community in Rome that he had never visited. But his words here in Chapter 14 are pointedly focused on the life of that community. In Here, Paul is encouraging the Roman church to welcome members with various understandings of what constitutes proper faith practice in matters of food, observance of special days, and the like, and to resist passing judgment on one another over such matters. It seems clear that Paul is speaking to a real or at the very least a potential division in the church at Rome. And while we might expect that Paul would encourage toleration of such differences for the sake of holding the fledgling church together, he is actually advocating for the Roman Christians not only to tolerate their differences, but to appreciate and indeed to cling to a much deeper unity that their differences on such matters reveal.

And that deeper unity rests in their allegiances. For as Paul says in verses 6-9, *“Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”*

The unity Paul names and advocates for the Romans is a unity based simply and squarely on their mutual allegiance to Christ. As William Greenway has said, “there is a positive triangulation here wherein our relation to every other is mediated through our relation to God.” And it is because of this relation to God that Paul can declare in verse 17 that *“the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”*

I think these verses should give those of us in the church today something to think about. Paul labors this point about not judging one another precisely because he is emphasizing that the kingdom to which those in Christ belong is a kingdom superior to, and destined to replace that of Caesar. The unity of Christians across traditional barriers such as those he names is a sign to the principalities and powers that a greater rule than theirs has begun. However, when the church begins to divide along lines related to ethnic or tribal loyalty, it is a sign that it is still living in a kingdom ruled by Caesar, and a church that all too obviously embodies the social, ethnic, cultural, and political divisions of its surrounding world is no real challenge to the Caesars of this world.

I believe that one of the primary reasons that the unity and global goodwill that our nation experienced in the days immediately following 9/11 was so fleeting was because Americans seriously misplaced our allegiances in the months and years that followed. Sadly, many of us in the church did the same.

I wonder what Paul would write to the church of America today, on this day when we remember the anniversary of terrorist attacks that shook the foundations of the kingdoms of this world. I wonder what challenges he would issue to a church that now occupies a seat of

power and influence in one of the most expansive and dominant empires our world has known. I suspect that whatever else he would write, he would encourage us today, as he did the Romans in verse 19, to *“pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”*

Within weeks following the attacks of 9/11, a group of interfaith leaders issued a response to terrorism signed by over 3500 religious leaders from a multitude of faith traditions including our own that said, among other things, that “we must not allow this terror to drive us away from being the people God has called us to be.” They went on to assert “the vision of community, tolerance, compassion, justice and the sacredness of human life which lies at the heart of all our religious traditions.” To date it remains one of the most inclusive religious statements ever released.¹

Such a vision of human community transcending even the traditional boundaries of nation and religion is, I believe, one of the most important and enduring legacies that we have inherited from 9/11. It is also a vision that remains a long way from being fulfilled. But these are the things that really matter. For our faith testifies that it is only in the context of community and interdependence that God’s truest blessings are to be found.

And so today, as we remember the tenth anniversary of the tragedies of 9/11, and as we kick-off a new year in our life together here at BWCOB and enjoy the blessings of shared food, fun, and fellowship, let us not forget that we do none of this to ourselves. For we are the Lord’s, and as such we are called to witness to another way of living – a way that embodies the vision of community, tolerance, compassion, justice, and the sacredness of human life. These are the things that really matter. And they are not for us alone. They are for all the world. May they spring up in us like a fountain, and shower all the world with God’s unchanging love.

Benediction

As we take our leave from this place, may it be with renewed faith in the Christ we serve, renewed appreciation for this community of which we are a part, renewed vision of the things that really matter, and with renewed commitment to share that kingdom vision with a hurting and broken world. May it be so.

¹ <http://www.nccusa.org/news/interfaithstatement.html>