

## **SERMON: SEPTEMBER 11, 2002**

**Delivered at “In Memory and Hope”**

**By Richard F. Jones, Minister, The First Parish of Bolton**

It is September in Bolton, and many things compete for our attention. So I thank each of you for choosing to spend an hour on this day remembering events which changed us all. I particularly thank my brothers in ministry, Father Ray Goodwin of St. Francis Xavier Church, and Pastor Willard Dickerson of Trinity Church, Congregational for their presence at this service, those representatives of our community who lit candles in memory of the victims of the tragic events of “9/11,” the members of the Schola Cantorum of The Church of St. John the Evangelist in Worcester who were able to join us for their gift of music, and our own director of music, Sean Redrow, whose ministry we cherish. I welcome the members of our police, fire, and ambulance squads who we know would do for us what their counterparts in New York and Washington in these cities last September. We are so grateful for your selfless service.

On Labor Day, a year ago, I drove to Worcester to celebrate a friend’s sixtieth birthday. It was an afternoon of easy laughter and happy conversation. Old acquaintances of mine, the Georges, were there, and I chatted with them about the upcoming marriage of their daughter. The next Sunday, this sanctuary was full as we gathered for “Homecoming Sunday,” Edie Clark was the guest preacher and her theme was thankfulness. As the Call to Worship, we read a poem by W.S. Merwin entitled “*Thanks*” which included these words:

*“We are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings, we are running out of the glass rooms with our mouths full of food to look at the sky....standing by the windows looking out in our directions, back from a series of hospitals...after funerals...after the news of the dead....over telephones....in doorways....in elevators...we are saying thank you; thank you we are saying and waving, dark though it is.”*

On a sunny, perfect Tuesday morning, two days later, I slept late, and turned on the TV before I took my dog out for her walk. I saw a tower on fire. When I came back in, I saw a plane fly into another tower. And the words I chose as the Call to Worship on Sunday, September 9 took on a different, frightening meaning.

A parishioner was supposed to be in one of those towers. Another had planned to be on one of the planes that flew into the towers. I found out much later that my cousin Scott had been scheduled to be the pilot of one of those planes until a few days before its flight, and that my cousin Sally was spared when her office at the Pentagon was destroyed by another hijacked plane only because she was at her dentist's office. My friends in Worcester, the George's, were not as lucky. Their daughter, Linda, was on one of the planes, and Monica Hatch, who has sung for us tonight, and was supposed to have sung at Linda's wedding, sang at her funeral instead.

It seemed that whenever we opened the doors of the church that week a year ago a crowd gathered. The Sunday after September 11, I stood in the church office with Sean before worship and watched as people I had hardly ever seen in church or had never seen in church marched across the lawn to join those who are here every week. It was standing room only. I had no sermon prepared. I had already preached three sermons that week and I was tired and on edge. I preached either the best sermon of my career that Sunday or the worst. I'm still not sure. (And the opinion of the congregation is divided!)

What I am sure of is that we all felt very vulnerable on September 11. It wasn't just that our nation, so powerful, so protected, had been attacked. What happened to the people in the planes and in the towers and at the Pentagon seemed almost to have happened to us. The average age of the men and women who died was the average age of most of us who live in Bolton. They were doing what we do every day --- working or going to work, traveling to business

meetings or family holidays. And then they were gone. We wondered if it could happen to us.

We experienced what I have seen families experience when one of their loved ones dies. They are more conscious of their own mortality, and also of what is most important to them. They see their lives in a larger perspective. Disagreements are forgotten. They focus not on what divides them, but what unites them. They make promises that they will pay more attention to each other and spend more time together. Do they keep these promises? For a little while, but then the familiar rhythms assert themselves, and things are, again, as they always have been.

We made similar promises to ourselves a year ago. Have we kept them? Do we see our lives in a larger context or are we back in our own little corner of the world? Do we worry more about the 1.6 million dollars that seems to have disappeared from our school district's bank accounts or the increase in our property assessments or do we worry that 95% of people in the world make less money in a year than we make in a month and would, therefore, be incredibly grateful if, suddenly, they had 1.6 million dollars to lose or a house worth \$800,000? Don't you think so? Should we be grateful? Are we Are we as quick to forgive as we were last September or are we settling scores? The generous spirit that animated us all --- is it still there, or are we holding on tightly to all of our toys like the five year old who does not want to share? Are we leaving the office early so we can throw a football with our children before the sun sets, or has what we do once more become what we are?

We haven't been good about keeping our promises, but we have kept our memories. The memory that has stayed with me more than any other is of what a young mother asked me after one of the services. *"What should I tell my children? Why was God asleep?"*

I have spent the better part of a year trying to answer those questions for myself. And, as busy as I was, I didn't have time to react to the

events of September 11 until I was on vacation in Maine this summer. Sitting on by porch by the ocean on the Fourth of July, the radio playing in the background, I heard the music of the National Anthem, and I finally cried.

I cannot assert that everything that happens to us happens for a reason. I will not claim that God determined who would be late for work at the World Trade Center on September 11 and live and who would be at their desk early and die. There are things we will never be able to figure out, that will always remain maddeningly mysterious, and we should never confuse God with Santa Claus, although some of us have.

What I do know is that what Victor Frankel wrote of his experiences in the death camps of Auschwitz and Dachau is true, that when every other freedom is taken away from a human being, one freedom remains, the freedom to choose how we will respond to any circumstance we are facing. And I do know that God had nothing to do with the destruction of September 11. I believe that God had everything to do with the firefighters, and police, and ambulance squads that raced into the buildings even though it might and it did cost them their lives. I believe God had everything to do with the passengers on Flight 93 who drove their hijacked plane into the ground though it meant their death rather than allow it to continue on a course that would have caused many more deaths. I believe that God had everything to do with the man who stayed with someone he didn't know in a stairwell of the World Trade Center as it began to disintegrate so that this stranger would not be alone. God was not asleep. God was there.

I believe that if it were not for the intervention of God in our world and our lives, all we would know is the despair, the chaos of that day a year ago. I believe that the creative power of God always seeks to bring love where there is hate, healing where there is pain, light where there is darkness. And I believe that this is what each of us was born to do as well, that this is the only reason why we were given the gift

of life, that joining with God in this creative, redemptive work is the sole purpose of our lives, and that this is what we should tell our children and teach them.

The Saturday after September 11 last year, I attended a concert in Worcester at Holy Cross College. The concert ended with a performance of Mozart's "*Exaltate Jubilate*," its "Alleluias" flung bravely, recklessly into the horror of the week. Listening to the music, I was reminded that there was still beauty in the world. There still is. There always will be. But how much of it we will know is up to us.

There is nothing I can tell you tonight that is more important than this. My dear brothers and sisters, become the beauty for which you long. Become the beauty for which you were made. Become the beauty that you are.