

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service”

Micah 6:6-8

John 3:16-17

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Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

John 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Do you remember that moment? That moment fifteen years ago when you learned of the terrorist attacks?

I remember it exactly. John and I were sitting at the kitchen table at our home in Clarendon Hills. Annie had just walked across the street to school; she had just started 6th grade at the new Middle School. We were enjoying a second cup of coffee before leaving for work. At quarter to eight, we were

watching “Good Morning America,” as we always did then, on our little TV on the corner of the kitchen counter, when breaking news interrupted the usual banter: a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Immediately, news crews began surrounding the towers to cover the unfolding situation. Was it pilot error? A navigation system malfunction? Then, as the cameras rolled, the unthinkable happened. Just 15 minutes after the first crash, another plane swept low, careening directly into the second tower. The image is indelibly etched in my mind.

I’m sure I’m not the only one here who remembers watching ... watching, as the day unfolded ... watching, as smoke billowed out of the towers and people leapt to their deaths ... watching, as the news came from the Pentagon where a third plane crashed ... watching, as the fields of rural Pennsylvania became a graveyard for a fourth plane’s passengers and crew. In just over one hour’s time, almost 3,000 innocent people had lost their lives.

Today, we all remember. Some remember more achingly than others. Mary Watanabe remembers. She remembers how she lost her nephew Karleton: “He was traveling from Boston to Los Angeles on business for John Hancock where he was a Financial Analyst.” Karleton was on American airlines flight 11, the first plane to crash into the towers. He was just 31 years old. Mary remembers: “Karleton, in his own tongue-in-cheek way, described himself as ‘ridiculously tall’ (he was 6’5”) and ‘insanely handsome.’ He was so smart, so funny, and so darling. He signed all his emails to me ‘Kiss, kiss.’” Karleton left behind his wife, Haven, their son, Jackson, who was just 18 months old. Just two days before Karleton died, he had called his parents to

share the exciting news that Haven was pregnant with their second child. Their son, Parker, was born in May. He would never know his amazing father.

Today, we all remember. Some of us remember with exhausting heaviness.

One of our members – I’ll call him Jerry, since he prefers to remain anonymous - Jerry was inside the Towers when the first plane struck. Working for a business in Chicago, he flew to New York regularly to visit clients, many who had offices in the World Trade Center. He’d gotten used to the routine – in fact, he especially enjoyed his firm’s primary client, Angela, and her husband Jim. They were awesome. When they found out that he often went across the street from his hotel to eat at the Olive Garden – the Olive Garden, of all the restaurants in Manhattan! - they intervened and made Jerry join them for dinner whenever he was in town.

Normally he was in Manhattan every 3rd Tuesday of the month; but family circumstances dictated a change in schedule that September. He got to the World Trade Center early; he was in the ground floor lobby waiting in line for coffee when the fire alarms went off.

At that point, none of them knew what had happened. They figured there was a fire. The security guard in the lobby made the call for everyone to vacate. Everyone started leaving; Jerry dutifully joined them. He was half-way out the door when he heard a voice saying, “Walking away is not why I put you here.” He was still a licensed paramedic. He knew it would take first-responders time to get there. He thought, “This is where I am called to be.” He

turned around. Of the 1,000 who were leaving the building, about ten went back in. He says, “I don't remember whether we heard the plane or whether we ever realized we were in danger. I just did what I thought was right.”

Jerry and his company of ten strangers stayed for 45 minutes, sorting people as they emerged from the stairs with varying level of injuries, clearly more than the result of a fire, triaging and treating as they could. When the first-responders could finally get through, they sent Jerry and the others out through the parking garage. They'd gone a block when the Towers collapsed. Jerry was pinned under a pile of debris, his legs numbed ... and the same ten people who had triaged with him carried him out. Eventually he found his way to Angela and Jim's apartment ... and was there when Jim learned that his beloved Angela was in her office when the plane hit. They both knew what that meant.

Jerry counts himself lucky. He happened to be in the lobby buying coffee instead of one of the thousands upstairs in an office. Jerry doesn't count himself heroic. He says, the heroes “are those who started climbing the stairs to make sure others made it out, even though they wouldn't. ‘Greater love hath no man than this, than to lay down his life’” The heroes, he says, are his friends who served in the military in special ops, one sent to Afghanistan, days, or even hours after 9/11. Needless to say, perhaps, he never returned. Jerry says, “I have no idea what he was doing over there, but I know he was doing it well and honestly and ethically, because that's who he was.” Unlike Jerry and his ten comrades in the lobby, Jerry says, “[People like this] know

exactly what the risks are. Every day, they present their bodies as a living sacrifice and consider it their reasonable service.”

And Jerry’s right. He’s absolutely right. And yet, I want to push ever-so-gently back at him and say that all sacrifice matters, and God isn’t keeping score. God isn’t hoping all of us will be martyrs. Instead, God is longing for each of us to be open to that moment when we hear God’s call: “Walking away is not why I put you here” ... that moment when we have the choice to turn and say: “I know that this is where I am called to be.”

I don’t know where you are being called, specifically, right now. But this much I know: whenever fear grips the world, over North Korean nuclear tests, or ISIS attacks in Paris and Istanbul and Orlando, or in our loved ones’ lives when they get a difficult prognosis or a job evaporates or a marriage ends – whenever fear grips our world, we can walk out the door and wait for the professionals show up. Or we can hear God’s call, and stop in our tracks and turn around, and offer whatever gifts we have - gifts of faith and courage, of comfort and the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

I don’t know where you are called, specifically, right now. But this much I know: whenever sorrow overwhelms the world, by images of a 5-year-old Syrian boy sitting alone in an ambulance, silently wiping his bloody hand on the seat, or reports of flooding in Baton Rouge and fires in California, or news of a Lake Forest high school kid who lost his Dad already and now his Mom died too, or our friend’s depression has plummeted her into darkness again – whenever sorrow overwhelms our world, we can walk out the door and hope the professionals show up. Or we can hear God’s call, and stop in our tracks

and turn around, and offer whatever gifts we have - gifts of generosity and prayer, of acceptance and shelter that we've experienced in Jesus Christ.

I don't know where you are called, specifically, right now. But this I know: whenever cynicism numbs the world, by yet another unbelievable turn in this impossible election cycle, or news of corruption at the core of a non-profit, or the ugliness of gossip over a neighbor's infidelities, we can walk out the door and vote for "none of the above," and give up on charities, and shrug our shoulders at broken relationships. Or we can hear God's call, and stop in our tracks and turn around, and offer whatever gifts we have – gifts of commitment to civility and political engagement, gifts of compassion and forgiveness that we know in Jesus Christ.

In the weeks ahead, in our fall worship series, we'll explore more what this means for us: what it means for every single one of us to be called by God ... what it means to be called to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God ... what it means for us to be called as partners in God's love for this broken world ... what it means for us to be called as partners in Christ's service ... what it means for us to hear God's voice saying, "Walking away is not why I put you here" ... what it means for each of us to find ourselves in that moment when we have the choice to turn and say: "I know that this is where I am called to be."

For now, you may or may not know where or how you are called to serve. You may or may not know exactly what your gifts may be. But this much you *do* know. This much we *all* know. We know that "God so loved our

world that he gave his only Son, that whoever trusts in him will not perish but have eternal life.” We know that God still loves our world, in its brokenness and fear. We know that God still loves our nation in the midst of its splintering and pain. We know that God still loves our neighbors in Chicago wracked by gun violence, and our neighbors in Lake County frozen by their lack of opportunity. We know that God still loves our friends who struggle with their addictions and their cancer, and God still loves our families torn by divorce and fiscal pain. We know that God still loves our own hearts in their grief or in depression, and God still loves our own wills wounded by our sins and failures, and God still loves our own minds in our doubts and in our longing. We know that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” And we know this too: *this* world God loves – this is *exactly* where we are called to be. Amen.