

**Sermon for September 11, 2011**  
**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Trinity Church in Menlo Park**  
**The Rev. Matthew R. Dutton-Gillett**

I remember very well where I was 10 years ago on this morning. Our work day at St. Elizabeth's Church in Knoxville, TN, had barely begun when a member of the church called our office and said there had been a terrible plane crash in New York City. We brought a TV into the office, and found a station carrying coverage of the aftermath of that crash into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. Not all that long after we turned the TV on, we saw the second plane crash into the second tower, and we knew that we were now watching something more than a tragic accident.

Throughout the remainder of that day, people filtered in and out of the church to pray, to talk, to cry. That evening, we held a hastily arranged service. When it came time for the homily, I hardly knew what to say. I don't now really remember what I said. I do remember how very hard it was to say it.

The question which, I think, dominated the minds of the worshipers that evening, including my own, was the question, "Why?" That seems to be the "go to" question that we human beings pull out whenever something terrible happens. It is, I think, attached to a deeply human need to make life meaningful. We want to be able to understand things, to make sense of things, to fit the puzzle pieces of life into a picture that we can recognize. It is easy to do this when life is going well. But when life seems to fall apart, it can be very hard to make sense of what is happening to us.

Sometimes, that deep desire to make the puzzle pieces fit together can lead us down some very dark alleys. Some in the aftermath of 9/11 went down the alley of divine judgment and proclaimed that the tragedies of that day were God's way of delivering some kind of message. Many went down the alley that declared Islam to be dangerous and all Muslims to be suspects. As a nation, we went down an alley that convinced us that the world out there was far more dangerous than we had imagined, and it would require the launching of two wars and the devotion of massive resources to defense and security to keep that dangerous world from harming us again. The fear and anger engendered by the events of 9/11 drew us into these dark alleys and, in many ways, into the darker parts of ourselves as we struggled to find our way back to a world we could understand again.

As I reflect now on these past 10 years, I think that at the deepest level of our national consciousness the events of 9/11 put us in touch with a profound sense of vulnerability. And we have been trying ever since to figure out what to do with that vulnerability. It has made us extremely uncomfortable. It makes us feel powerless or, at least, less powerful than we are accustomed to. We keep hoping that, as we weave our way through these dark alleys of Islamophobia, fear of what's "out there", war and obsession with security, one or all of them will lead us back to the broad avenue of the America and world we once knew. But it doesn't seem to be working.

The readings that are before us this morning may help illuminate these dark alleyways, as they offer us two very different examples of how people might respond when they suddenly find themselves thrust into a situation which uncomfortably reveals their vulnerability.

From the book of Genesis, we hear a small portion of the story of Joseph, what might be considered the climactic moment of the story. Many of you will probably remember the story of Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob who is the great ancestor of the people of Israel. As the story goes, Joseph is Jacob's favorite, as symbolized by the wonderful coat that Jacob gives him to wear. Joseph knows he is the favorite, and so he becomes rather difficult to live with as far as his brothers are concerned. Ultimately, his brothers decide to get rid of Joseph and throw him into a pit, leaving him for dead. At the last moment, they spot some slave-traders and decide that it would be a much better strategy to sell Joseph into slavery. Through a number of twists and turns, Joseph rises from the status of slave to occupy a position of great power and importance in the Egyptian government, and thus he is eventually brought face to face with his brothers in the scene described for us this morning. Joseph's brothers approach him filled with fear, knowing that he has every right to respond with vengeance and anger against them for what they had done to him. But they find that vengeance is the furthest thing from Joseph's mind. His heart opens to them, and the grace of love and forgiveness pours out in a way that brings healing to this family.

Joseph, as a young man, was thrown into a place of profound vulnerability: had his brothers left him in the pit, he would surely have died. And when they sold him into slavery, he had no reason to expect that his life would ever be any life other than the dangerous life of enslavement. Yet, Joseph was able to come through that experience of vulnerability in a way that led him to find his soul, to discover his true self and this, ultimately, redeemed his experience and led him to a place where he was able to offer love and forgiveness.

The slave in Jesus' parable, however, was not able to respond to his own moment of vulnerability with anything approaching the spiritual skill and grace of Joseph. For the slave, his vulnerable moment comes when he is summoned before the master to repay the debt that he owes. The master is completely within his rights to demand payment, and the slave enters that audience with the master knowing that the result of his inability or failure to pay the debt could be torture and imprisonment until the debt is paid. That penalty would effectively end any hope the slave might have had for a better life. His only option is to ask for the master's understanding and mercy, and amazingly, that is exactly what he receives.

But the very next moment in the story shows us that what should have been a moment of redemption for the slave was completely lost on him. The moment he meets another slave who owes him a debt he flies into a rage, demands payment, and when his friend cannot pay him, he responds not by sharing the mercy he has been given but by throwing his friend into prison. As a result, the master withdraws the mercy he had previously shown the slave, and the slave loses himself. He loses his very soul. He has done the opposite of Joseph: he emerged from his own moment of vulnerability gripped by fear

and anger, and he is trapped in them. Where Joseph's moment of vulnerability broke open his heart, the slave's heart is hardened by his experience.

The events of 9/11 brought us face to face with our collective vulnerability, and for a moment, we followed the path of Joseph, and used that experience to find our souls. For a moment, our hearts, too, were broken open. Stories poured forth about the kindnesses that were offered by Americans one to another. For several days, crime rates around the country fell significantly. People responded to one another more gently and more compassionately. We had been deeply wounded, and out of that wound poured forth a great deal of grace.

Sadly, we did not walk the path of Joseph for very long. In time, we allowed ourselves to become gripped by fear and anger, we allowed our hearts to harden and, like the slave in Jesus' parable, I believe that we have become trapped. Fear and anger dominate our national discourse and our political process. Our leaders speak more and more about cutting programs upon which the most vulnerable members of our society depend, and yet there is very little discussion of reducing the considerable resources devoted to security and defense, because we are afraid. In our anger and our fear, laws have been passed to prevent Islamic Sharia law from being used in some states, even though that is hardly a possibility. We even had someone who wants to be President of the United States publicly suggest that our constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion really only applies to Christians, and certainly not to Muslims. Mercy and compassion have largely ceased to be public values, I think because they are advertised as implying weakness, and weakness implies vulnerability, and vulnerability is something that we simply cannot have.

But as this morning's Gospel makes clear, it is precisely where mercy and compassion become real that the kingdom of God is to be found. And as that Gospel also makes uncomfortably clear, those who seek mercy and compassion from God are expected to make that same mercy and compassion manifest in their own lives. And we are not given permission to manifest mercy and compassion only to those most like ourselves. These are not tribal values, to be shared only within our own small group. They are universal values that we are to manifest toward all human beings. The truth of the Gospel is that the kingdom of God is not an armed camp. It is a condition in which borders are open; a condition in which we invite vulnerability into our lives rather than seeking to keep it at bay. The life of Christ proclaims that the most powerful moment in human life is the moment of the cross, the moment when we come face to face with our own vulnerability. By embracing that moment and using it to find the transformation and new life that always lies on the other side of every cross, as Joseph did, we find our souls.

This morning, we at Trinity not only acknowledge this anniversary of 9/11, but we also gather as one congregation to kick-off the Fall season of the church's life. It is a Sunday when we celebrate who we are as a community of faith, and there is no time when the need for that celebration of community is greater than on this anniversary. For if we, as a nation, are to find our soul again, I think it must begin in communities like Trinity. For here, we gather around an understanding of the Gospel that is not rooted in fear but in grace. For here, we gather around an understanding of the Gospel that is not about heaven and hell

but about the call of God in Christ to each of us to be transformed in the deepest places of ourselves so that God's kingdom of mercy and compassion can become manifest in and through us. For here, we gather around the mystery of Christ in whom we see not some kind of superhuman superhero eager to bring about the end of the world and smite evil-doers but the power of God manifested in the vulnerability of the cross, in a Jesus broken and bruised. This country and this world needs communities that resist the harmful generalities that our public discourse so easily tosses about and instead offer a narrative of peace, justice and reconciliation. For if we as individuals and as a community of faith in this time and place can begin to carry a brighter light into the dark alley-ways of our national psyche, that light can begin to lead us out of the narrow paths of fear and anger and into that broader avenue where we can indeed rediscover our collective soul.

Historian, author and Episcopalian Diana Butler Bass, in reflecting on this anniversary of 9/11, suggests that remembering is not about replaying images of what happened over and over again in order to rekindle the emotions of that terrible day. Instead, she says, remembering is really about letting "the pictures fade, the memories transform into lessons learned and wisdom" so that we can "interpret the remembering into healing, wholeness and the embrace of life anew." My hope and prayer for all of us here today is that we will leave this place not overwhelmed by sadness, but uplifted by hope. For in the midst of the world's chaos and tragedy we are alive, we are here, and we are called by God to go forward into a future that will indeed be uncertain and filled with risk, but which is also filled with countless opportunities to, as Diana Butler Bass says, embrace life anew. The other side of the vulnerability of the cross is the resurrection, the divine insistence that life and love ultimately prevail. Let us again be a people of life and love, and leave the fear and the anger behind. Let us not be a people whose hearts continue to be hardened, but a people whose hearts are broken open, so that the grace of love and forgiveness pours forth through us for the healing of the whole human family.