

(*This sermon was preached on September 11, 2011, the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, and the Pentagon in the United States)

Lord's Day 2 Matthew 22

Digital watches and clocks still do it to me. '9-11' always reminds me of that 9-11.

It has become an icon, a brand

Ten years on we remember where we were when we heard about it. If you are too young to remember that day, you need to know that it was a day that the rest of us will never forget. Standing in the kitchen, driving to work, radio news that sounded like that old Orson Welles piece, War of the Worlds. Unflappable news anchors had a strain, an edge in their voices.

The images remain. Against a bright blue sky, planes plunging into the twin towers in New York City. Fire. Smoke. People jumping to their deaths, the buildings coming down.

"It seemed like a movie", we said, over and over again. It was the only frame of reference we had. Too horrifying to really be happening.

We gathered here that evening. Disoriented, troubled, we did not know just what we had witnessed that day. We gathered to pray because we did not know what else to do. When Christians are afraid or worried, or disoriented, we come together to pray to the God who says he is our refuge and our strength. (Psalm 46)

Even here, the skies were empty as no planes flew in North American airspace for several days.

In the aftermath people struggled to understand what had really happened.

Did the US bring this on themselves by their politics in the Middle East? How should Canada respond? Was bin Ladin our generation's Hitler? Should Canada join in the war on Iraq?

The events of September 11, 2001 have changed our world and our lives in simple and in terrible ways. Here's an example from the simple side. In 1981 I drove from Ontario to Iowa where my sister was at Dordt College. A friend's mom had asked me to bring a care package for her daughter. The box was big enough to hold two microwaves. It was on the back seat. At the border I was asked, 'what is in the box?' I answered, 'I have no idea, just bringing it along for a friend'.

The border security officer said, 'Have a nice day!'

The last time I flew I was pulled out of line randomly to have my hands tested for explosives residue.

On the other side, we have seen so many more innocent people die. Iraqis who both as individuals and as a country, had nothing to do with 9-11 have borne the brunt of the angry American and United Nations response.

How do you come to know your misery? That life could be different?

The catechism asks us this question today.

How do you come to know that life is not the way it should be?

That the world is far from God, that relationships between countries and ethnic groups and people of different religions are not as they could or should be?

That my own life and relationships do not need to be marred by guilt or shame, that I should not need to wear a mask when I am with other people. I should be free to be who I am with myself, others and God.

'The law of God tells me'.

The law of God, held up against my own sin, my own guilt and all the chaos and sorrow and death of that day, and all the chaos and sorrow and terror that always seemed to happen somewhere else.

The law of God, the beautiful law of God that shows us how to live, that protects us from each other and calls us to leave our misery behind.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said any command of God has these two at its heart.

It is our Creator's will for us.

This week I learned something from one of our community gardeners. It is a law for tomato plants in Alberta. After August 15, all blossoms should be pruned off. This will push the plant to ripen the fruit that is already growing. Leaving the flowers on does no good at all after August 15. She had learned it from Lois Hole.

Improving the care of tomato plants is pretty simple. But if we would all give our heart, soul, mind and strength to the Lord. If we would all love and care for our neighbor as much as we care for ourselves, we would bear much fruit. (Kuyvenhoven in 'Comfort and Joy')

We would not live with guilt and shame and regret. We would not live with violence and sorrow.

Our misery is that we don't.

We sin against God and his law.

We do this in two ways.

We do it the way skiers and boarders and snowmobilers ignore the signs and warnings and go out of bounds. We rebel. We cross the line on purpose. We act as if those rules are there for someone else, but not for me.

And we do it the way paint-ballers or video gamers do it. That is, we aim wide, or high, or low. We miss the target. Our aim is off. Even when we aim at keeping God's law, we miss the target.

How bad is it?

The catechism says this: 'I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.'

Really?

Is it that bad? Is this a Calvinist hang up? Is this a slathering on of guilt?

What do you think?

It is easy to downplay our sin by comparing it to the worst examples around. Osama bin Ladin perhaps.

But if the worst kind of hatred is to ignore, then is a life without prayer saying, 'God, you matter so little to me that I cannot be bothered to give you a thought, much less a prayer'? Could forgetting to pray, to give thanks, really be that bad?

With respect to hatred for our neighbor consider this:

Which new law came into effect on September 1, 2011 in Alberta?

(distracted driving law)

It was brought in because by our actions so many of us drivers showed that we thought this way, 'I am supremely confident in my ability to pilot a ton of cold hard steel at any speed with less than my full brain'.

'I am not concerned enough for the safety of other drivers, or cyclists or pedestrians or children to voluntarily stop talking or texting while I drive'.

'I do not love my neighbor enough to change my behavior for him/her.'

And, in case you are wondering, yes, I am guilty too.

Where there is a shortage of love, the world is forced to make another law. Where evil is unleashed we clamp down with more security. It is a matter of public record how freedom was trumped by security concerns. In the last ten years, especially the economic instability the one item in budgets that has never been challenged has been security. Anything to do with security was green lighted.

On this day of remembering we remember that God's response to our sin, to our evil, to all the sin and evil in the world was to come himself in Jesus Christ. God's answer was and is forgiveness, mercy for you and me, for the world.

Jesus died under the weight of our sin. Jesus suffered the misery of separation from God, Jesus never rebelled. Jesus hit the target of full obedience. He died saying, 'It is finished'.

God's response to our sin and misery is to forgive and love and accept us.

What is wrong with us? What did we witness on 9-11? Some people say it was a clash of culture. 'They cannot stand to see us live in freedom'. Some say it was a clash of religion and that as soon as we leave the dark age of religion behind we will all live happily ever after. Some say that it was economic and political injustice, others find the diagnosis and the answer in education and the enlightenment education brings.

The Bible and the catechism give us a deeper and different diagnosis. The Bible and the catechism say, 'the problem is that we human beings are sinful. We do not love and respect the God who gave us each life and breath. We do not love our neighbor as ourselves'.

The Times of London once asked a number of prominent people to submit essays to the paper on the question, 'what is the problem with the world?' G.K Chesterton was one of them. If you don't know his name, do a Google search. Chesterton's essay? In answer to your question, 'what is the problem with the world', 'I am'. Sincerely yours, G.K Chesterton.

That's the Christian answer. Human sin, mine included is the problem with the world, is the reason for our misery. God's answer is Jesus Christ.

Three ways for us to respond:

1. Pray for your own forgiveness. If you never have before, do it now, do it today. Ask Jesus for forgiveness. Don't minimize your sin by comparing it to Osama bin Ladin or some tyrant or dictator. We need to take seriously our own sin, the damage we have done to others around us. Pray for your own forgiveness.
2. Pray for mercy from God for our world. It is part of our priestly task in the world to ask God for mercy on behalf of a world that has forgotten how to pray. This morning we heard the great good news of an abducted three year old who was returned safely home by his abductor. Even as we give thanks to God, we are also called to pray for the person behind this troubling story.
3. Follow Jesus into the way of forgiveness. We follow the one who prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. There is not enough time now, and I am not qualified to speak with authority on the growing practice of restorative justice. Joanne M, who is here with us, is the person to talk to about that. (email me pastor at crca.org if you want to know more)
But that path really seems like the Jesus' way forward.

The Lord be gracious to you. The Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.