

Sermon for 9/11 Anniversary

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Delivered at Holy Cross Monastery, West Park, NY during the First Order Chapter of the Society of St. Francis

Proper 19 Year A

Exodus 14:19-31

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Let us pray: Compassionate God, as we gather today, we open our hearts to you and ask for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, recognizing that there are only two feelings. Love and Fear. There are only two languages. Love and fear. There are only two activities. Love and fear. There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results. Love and fear. Love and fear. (Adapted from Michael Leunig, *A Common Prayer*, HarperCollins Religious, Sydney, 1990)

What a great joy to be gathered here today with friends and people of faith; to be reading Scriptures about forgiveness and sharing the Sacrament, being assured of God's forgiveness and commissioned to be ambassadors of reconciliation. This is the only context I can bear to think about 9/11. The hurt is still there, and we pray for all who died, all who suffer grief or disability because of the attacks on New York and Washington DC—all the wounded. We pray for them and hold them in our hearts. Politicians have to balance American interests and the authority of pollsters against their re-election chances when they talk about these events. Inevitably it becomes "us against them." It is so easy to fall into that. Yet we are called to live differently as Christians. Embracing our pain, is there still room to love our enemies?

In the Exodus passage for today we are reminded God is very much active in human history, working in our midst to bring us out of slavery into freedom. Not everyone has moved beyond believing God takes sides in human conflict (that is a big part of the rhetoric from both Al Qaeda and some Westerners). But we must never lose sight of God's action that is to free us from all the things that enslave us—capitalism, Islamism, "Christian-ism", Marxism, liberalism, conservatism—and all the other "—isms." God is actively leading us into a land of new possibilities for the human spirit. I say that with confidence because God has continued to lead his people through obstacles, from the Red Sea onwards, leading us to freedom. The evidence has mounted over the ages and God's methods have matured. From drowning Pharaoh God gave his only Son. God raised the stakes. There is nothing God won't do to set humanity free.

The reality of 9/11 is that a terrible thing happened. We live with the question: how will we prevent it from happening again in America, in Britain, in India, in Pakistan, in Sri Lanka, in Israel, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Zimbabwe, in south Africa, in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Norway, Syria, Northern Ireland,, Colombia, Mexico, Bali, the Solomon Islands, Japan...I've only just started on the list. Who can think of a country

that does not commemorate a tragedy where bombs exploded, innocent and not-so-innocent people died? How can we prevent such things from happening?

What would happen if we stopped judging each other, as Paul suggests in this morning's reading from Romans? I am not talking about "anything-goes" or suspending justice, but what if we humans started expecting the best of each other? What if we committed ourselves to a nonviolent response to whatever provocation? Not just you and me, but what if everybody made this commitment? Of course it won't happen spontaneously. It won't happen quickly. But I wonder if the perceived odds prevent us from even trying it at all? Alternatives can be taught, as the SSF Formator's learned at our conference in the Solomon Islands last year the Alternatives to Violence Project. Do we cringe from being called naïve? Spreading the message of nonviolence means working with whomever we can. It means refraining from violent thinking and action. It means being willing to keep on with it even as it seems more and more futile. Because what else can we do—us Bible-reading, Sacrament eating people? Can we go from Altar to armory? Some have had to, and some still do. But as Religious, we don't have to promote a diminished Gospel, a fear-based message.

The Gospel we have been given teaches love and forgiveness. Love is the opposite of fear. Love compels us to forgive our enemies. Jesus rejected violence and forgave his persecutors. That is the story that continues to inspire people throughout the ages. How many times we fail at this is not the point. Rather the point is how often we dust off and try again. Love never ends. It is never too late to do the loving thing.

So today, as we remember 9/11, Christians using the Common Lectionary around the world hear the message from Matthew—how often should I forgive? Matthew frames the question in terms of forgiving brothers and sisters in the Church, but Jesus' story is definitely not "churchy." Forgiveness frees us from retaliation. Forgiveness makes the human spirit shine. It shows the active, death-defying, all-powerful presence of god—that spiritual power of forgiveness shining in the human breast is a pillar of fire shining in the darkness of our confusion and hatreds, our pettiness and our fully justified reasons to annihilate each other. The only way to stop it, I sense from Jesus' teachings and example, even as he hung from the cross, is to forgive.

What are the stories that make you squirm and re-evaluate your life? What are the stories that make you pray: "Oh God, I wish I could be like that: like Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King, Gandhi?" Central to their stories is compassion, forgiveness, and a commitment to non-violence, we hear of love overcoming fear and hate. Their stories shape, for me, everything the Gospel stirs up in me. Jesus said things, Paul taught long ago, but these men and women show how it can be done today, in the face of horrendous modern evil. They show us that we live in a reality defined and infused with love.

We're God-loving, Bible-reading, Sacrament-eating, world-serving people: what other reality is there?

Today is 9/11 and some say it is about Islam and terrorism. I want to close by reminding us of some people I have recently added to my list of inspiring people who make me squirm, the Trappist monks of Tibherine, whose story has become famous recently with the release of the film "Of Gods and Men." If

you have seen the film, you know Christian de Cherge was prior of Notre Dame de l'Atlas, a small monastery in Algeria. He wrote a lot about Islam and Christianity. One thing he wrote was that "Forgiveness" is one of the names for God in the 99 praises of God. We know St. Francis loved that prayer and captured it for Franciscans in his Divine Praises, joyfully repeating the names of God: "You are forgiveness...you are love...you are joy." Anticipating his death, Christian wrote a letter to be opened in the event of his death. Terrorists in Algeria killed him and several other monks.

"If the day comes, and it could be today, that I am a victim of the terrorism that seems to be engulfing all foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family to remember that I have dedicated my life to God and Algeria.

That they accept that the Lord of all life was not a stranger to this savage kind of departure; that they pray for me, wondering how I found myself worthy of such a sacrifice; that they link in their memory this death of mine with all the other deaths equally violent but forgotten in their anonymity.

My life is not worth more than any other—not less, not more. Nor am I an innocent child. I have lived long enough to know that I, too, am an accomplice of the evil that seems to prevail in the world around, even that which might lash out blindly at me. If the moment comes, I would hope to have presence of mind, and the time, to ask for God's pardon and for that of my fellowman, and, at the same time, to pardon in all sincerity he would attack me.

I would not welcome such a death. It is important for me to say this. I do not see how I could rejoice when this people whom I love will be accused, indiscriminately, of my death. The price is too high, this so-called grace of the martyr, if I owe it to an Algerian who kills me in the name of what he thinks is Islam.

I know the contempt that some people have for Algerians as a whole. I also know the caricatures of Islam that a certain (Islamist) ideology promotes. It is too easy for such people to dismiss, in good conscience, this religion as something hateful by associating it with violent extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are quite different from the commonly held opinion. They are body and soul. I have said enough, I believe, about all the good things I have received here, finding so often the meaning of the Gospels, running like some gold thread through my life, and which began first at my mother's knee, my very first church, here in Algeria, where I learned respect for Muslims.

Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naïve or idealistic: "Let him tell us what he thinks now." But such people should know my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.

I give thanks to God for this life; completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and in spite of, all odds. In this Thank You—which says everything about my life—I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers—thank you a thousand fold.

And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too, I wish this thank you, this "A-Dieu," whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! Insha-Allah!

(The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria. John W. Kiser, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2003, pp. 244-246).