

*A sermon given on Sunday, September 11, 2011,  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***Humanizing Heroism***

The Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, is a sprawling park of nearly 500 acres with more than half a million graves. It occupies the highest point in Brooklyn, with a vista of the New York harbor and the Manhattan skyline.

Wandering through the cemetery this past Monday, I happened upon a September 11 memorial plaque. I paused to read the inscription, which reported that seventy-eight 9/11 victims are buried at Greenwood. I offered a short, silent prayer. Then, just nearby, I encountered another monument – an obelisk dedicated to the memory of the Brooklyn Theater Fire. On December 5, 1876 a catastrophic fire broke out during a stage production, trapping and claiming the lives of some 300 people. The obelisk at Greenwood marks the burial site of 103 unidentified victims of the fire – still the third most deadly fire in a public assembly building in U.S. history.

The juxtaposition of these two monuments reminded me that every age suffers its tragedy. The Brooklyn Theater Fire, of course, claimed only one tenth the number of lives as the destruction of the World Trade Center. More profoundly, the Theater Fire was an accident, while the 9/11 attack was born of murderous intent. Still, it occurred to me that for the tragedy of every generation, the dead are honored by looking back with recollected grief; and the horror of the event is redeemed in some small measure by looking forward with determined hope. Those who remembered the Brooklyn Theater Fire gave shape to their past grief with their memorial obelisk. They redeemed the tragedy in some measure by their determined hope, with the tangible form of dramatic fire code improvements.

So I wonder, what do we honor today with our recollected grief? And to what may we look forward with determined hope?

From the beginning, a great deal of our remembrance of September 11 has focused on the individual heroism of those caught in the firestorm. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams (at the time Archbishop of Wales), was – on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> – just two blocks from the World Trade Center. He was among those who barely made it through choking fumes and falling debris. Here is a bit of his reflection on heroism:

One of the main memories of those closest to the events of September 11 will probably be the prosaic heroism of firefighters and police in Manhattan. Memories of that morning for me include the enormously careful calm of the one of the building staff ... deliberately talking us through the practical things to do next; and of the staff who were supervising the children's day care centre, putting their own fear on hold while they reassured the children. Small examples of what was visible in much more costly ways outside ... . It puts a different perspective on

heroism for a moment. It tells us that heroism is not always bound up with drama, [in] the sense of a Great Cause, but is something about doing what is necessary for a community's health and security. For most of the time, this will be invisible; it is only in crisis that the habits slowly and even drearily formed over years emerge to make possible what can only be seen as extraordinary and selfless labors... .<sup>i</sup>

“Prosaic heroism” – ordinary, commonplace heroism. It seems like a contradiction in terms. Yet if the Archbishop is correct, courageous actions taken in crisis are born of a lifetime of habits, (as he says) slowly and even drearily formed over the years. This in no way diminishes the definition of a hero. It just tells us how they might be made. And thus it tells us how best to honor them. By remembering their sacrifice, yes. But also by dedicating ourselves to the same slow, ordinary cultivation of habits that enable such heroism in its hour of need. Habits of compassion, kindness, courage, and generosity.

Perhaps it is not a bad thing that this year's somber anniversary falls on our normally-exuberant Kick-Off Sunday. For what is it that causes a parent to bring a child to Church School? Surely it is the yearning to inculcate in our children those same qualities of compassion and faith and generosity. For that matter, what is it that invites us as adults to re-dedicate ourselves year after year to joining the worshipping community, just when the *Sunday Times* and a chocolate croissant issue an alternative invitation? Surely it is that same hope, that we might yet continue to be formed in our own habits as caring and courageous people.

On this 9/11 anniversary we honor those who died not so much by lionizing them as by humanizing them – and by striving to be most fully human ourselves. Humanizing, after all, is the opposite of de-humanizing. And it was precisely a radical dehumanization which played out on September 11. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked as symbols. But it is not symbols who suffer and die, it is people. Not two symbols, but 3,000 living, breathing human beings were struck down by terrorists that day. And if they are not to win out, then we must not allow ourselves to yield to the temptation of dehumanizing in return. As ethicist Edward Long has put it:

The danger terrorism poses may be less in what it can do to harm us than in what it prompts us to do to harm ourselves. If we lose confidence in our own best inclinations, thinking that threats can be dealt with only by mounting counter-threats, that ... violence can be stemmed only by counter-violence, terrorism will have reshaped us even if we think we have overcome it. ... We need a positive resurgence of our noble convictions rather than the embrace of strategies that merely mirror the stance of those we seek to oppose. Such a response to terrorism is possible only in the context of a very vital practice of faith deeply rooted in compassion.<sup>ii</sup>

So again, I say: we honor the heroes of 9/11 best by cultivating and living those very characteristics which enabled their heroism. These are habits, we must say, which are not much in evidence in the political and public discourse of our nation ten years on – habits of compassion, forbearance, courage, and generosity. Not dehumanizing, but the vital humanizing of ourselves and of one another – even of our opponents, even (as Christ commanded) of our enemies – this is our vocation.

That, then, is where our recollected grief becomes our determined hope – in our resolve to be, at all costs, humanizing, compassionate, generous of spirit. Let that be not only the heroism we recall, but the vision we embrace for ourselves.

I take you back once more to the Greenwood Cemetery. There my eye was drawn this week not only to the graveyard monuments, but out on the western horizon of the harbor port, to the distant but clearly visible Statue of Liberty. When the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke later of his survival, he recalled the image of that statue surrounded by smoke and ash.

The ideal of liberty at the core of America's greatness – the liberty symbolized by that statue emerging unscathed from the pall of devastation – was founded on a noble community of values in which we are proud to share. Values like tolerance and compassion, justice and mercy. Values at the heart of the Christian faith and other faiths. Let us keep them before us now – like a torch, like a beacon – even as we mourn and grieve. For if we are steadfast we know that, by the grace of God, no darkness, no evil can ever extinguish that beacon of hope.<sup>iii</sup>

May it be so. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002), p. 43.

<sup>ii</sup> Edward LeRoy Long Jr., *Facing Terrorism: Responding as Christians* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 96.

<sup>iii</sup> Archbishop Rowan Williams, sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral, London; as quoted in *The Living Church*, 9/11/2011, p. 14.