



## The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

### Sermon: Year A - Proper 19 - September 17, 2017

I've been to places where horrible things have happened.

I've been to the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor where I recalled stories of my aunts and uncles and my grandmother who saw the planes with red circles under their wings fly overhead to destroy the Pacific Fleet right over the spot where I was standing.

For two years I lived just a fifteen-minute walk away from the epicenter of the place where the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, bringing to life the stories of my junior high school Japanese teacher who went into the mountains that day as a kindergarten student and came home to learn that his father was dead, or my relative who saw a white flash and ran outside because her house immediately flooded with mud because a water main broke, or the sister of my boss who spent three disoriented days trying to get home because all her landmarks were gone.

Two years ago I stood at the airstrip on Peleliu in the Republic of Palau and I could feel how hot and humid it was and then I tried to imagine what it was like for the Marines who, because of the flamethrowers, had to sit in one hundred twenty degree heat with no fresh water as they tried to take the airstrip from the enemy.

I've been to the cliffs at Marpi Point on Saipan in the Marianas and felt the weight push down on my shoulders, the weight of souls too young, too young to die as they were ordered to jump off the precipice rather than surrender to the American forces who finally succeeded in taking the island from the Imperial Army.

And I felt the emotion in each place. My spirit seemed to fold time and my body went back not so much to relive each moment in each place, but to feel the emotion of what it was like to be there. And when I talked about it with my spiritual director, she said I felt what is called a holographic experience, like the energy of the people and their stories merged into one and the emotion from those people and their stories landed on my heart and stirred my soul.

And so, in 2003, on my very first trip to New York City, when I was in my second year of seminary, I expected the same thing when I made my pilgrimage to Ground Zero at the World Trade Center, only I didn't get what I expected.

Instead, it felt flat. Nothing happened. There was no emotion. All I saw was a clean, antiseptic gaping hole lit up at night with tractors and bulldozers flattening the ground and creating a foundation for a new building to go up. I felt nothing. So I walked around the perimeter, took a few pictures, walked to Battery Park, and looked at the Statue of Liberty facing toward the sea and away from it all. Ground Zero. That was it. And it bothered me, it bothered me because I couldn't feel. My heart was hardened. No emotion. I was numb.

## Pentecost 15 – Proper 19 – September 17, 2017, cont'd

This morning Paul says:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

And now looking back on all of it, I realize I was really angry. And in order to deal with all of it, I blocked out memories of the first forty-eight hours after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, sixteen years ago this week. I blocked out the frantic telephone call from my grandmother at 5:30 in the morning saying, “Moki! Turn on the TV. It’s Pearl Harbor all over again.” I blocked out the frantic parishioner at St. James in Waimea whose brother worked in the World Trade Center and who was inconsolable because she couldn’t get hold of him on the telephone. I blocked out image after image after image on CNN of airplanes flying into the buildings and people jumping over a hundred stories to their deaths rather than being burned alive in the fires. I blocked out the photos that flashed on the screens of the local news, the photos of Chin Ho’s granddaughter who lost her life while working as a pastry chef at Windows on the World.

And I especially blocked out the next day as I sat with my third and fourth grade students in my tiny classroom at Waimea Country School and tried to explain it all while struggling not to lie to the kids when they said, “But we’re safe here, right?” I blocked out their drawings of burning buildings and dive-bombing airplanes. I blocked it all out and two years later, when I got to New York and Ground Zero, I felt nothing. My heart was hardened. And I judged, judged with contempt, the people and events that finally made me choose to block it all out in order to deal with it, or not deal with it as the case may be.

But God is patient and God is persistent. God wasn’t going to settle for a hardened heart. And two days after my visit to Ground Zero, I was walking up the stairs of a subway station in Manhattan—I can’t remember which one—and on a wall I came upon a roll of newsprint, about thirty feet long, secured to the wall with duct tape, and Xeroxed photos of people who lost their lives on 9/11 that family and friends had cut out and glued onto the paper one-by-one, and others came along and wrote messages next to the photos. I love you. I miss you. Pray for peace.

And I studied the faces—the man with the moustache and the firefighter’s hat, the lady with the curly hair in a business suit, the young guy smiling in a t-shirt, and on and on and on it went along that subway station wall. It was endless.

And I thought to myself: What kind of hatred does one have to have to take away all these lives? Does that kind of darkness of the soul really exist? And, yes, I judged, but I judged with compassion, because I longed for peace, world peace, and peace for every human soul. And it made me sad, and the tears began to fall; not at the antiseptic site lit up with white lights, but in a subway station with grimy walls, full of people going home from work, and me looking at a piece of newsprint, that honored the fallen and the dead.

As for forgiveness? Well, I don’t know if I’m there yet, even sixteen years later, especially after the continual replays on TV this week. But compassion, to suffer with, and the willingness to forgive? That was the start, looking at those makeshift Xeroxed images, fastened to that grimy subway wall in 2003. So if you listen to the gospel this morning and hear, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-

## **Pentecost 15 – Proper 19 – September 17, 2017, cont'd**

seven times,” and you’re just not there yet, I can understand. I’m a flawed human being, and I’m right there with you, but we don’t have to stay there. For today, I’ll settle for the willingness to forgive—and to pray for peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding, including the imperfect understanding of fallible human minds, wounded human hearts, and lives lost too soon.

Since that trip in 2003, I’ve been back to New York countless times. Over the years, I’ve watched the construction progress, and when I was there last month, the new building was complete, complete and so tall that I had to strain my neck in order to see all the way to the top.

And I look at that magnificent structure and I think not of the day sixteen years ago, not of the anger and the resentment, the memories and the bitterness, not of the deaths and the images of horror. I look at that magnificent structure and I think of the resiliency of the human spirit, the kinds of things that we can do as children of God—whether it be creating gleaming towers, unlocking painful memories, or being willing to forgive.

If the human spirit can recreate a tower that reaches for the sky, then I think to myself: maybe someday, this human spirit can become willing to forgive and honor the words of Christ: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Brothers and sisters, today, let us pause for a moment and let us pray for peace and for all those who died sixteen years ago this week. Let us pray:

Father of all, we pray to you for those we love, but see no longer: Grant them your peace; let light perpetual shine upon them; and, in your loving wisdom and almighty power, work in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Amen.*