

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

John 14:1 "Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.'"

Most of us will never forget where we were and what we were doing on September 11th twenty years ago. Most of us, I imagine, were riveted to our television sets, watching a great American tragedy occur, a tragedy of biblical proportions. Each of us have our own stories to tell of that day, as we witnessed two jet airliners filled with passengers hijacked and flown directly into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Another crashed into the Pentagon building in northern Virginia, and upon a fourth, the hijackers were overpowered by brave passengers whereupon their plane crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania, rather than into Capitol Hill, the suspected target. We as a nation watched in utter horror as these events unfolded before our eyes --- images seen over and over again on television the next many days. Most of us will never forget the

horrific and terrifying site of the enormous Twin Towers remarkably just collapsing in front of our eyes into gigantic waves of dust clouds and debris, and then forever disappearing from the iconic New York skyline.

Most of us watched the unfolding events of that day from the outside. But at the time of first plane hitting the towers, some 14,000 people were inside the Twin Towers. Over the short time span between the moment when the first plane struck the towers, to the time when the second tower collapsed, each one of those 14,000 people became part of the most important drama of our time; each one of those individuals has *their* own story to tell as well.

Like many Americans I read some of the numerous books written thereafter or saw many of the movies and documentaries that followed, or watched the yearly anniversary memorials. Of the millions of words written about that wrenching day, most were told from people like us, people on the outside looking in. What struck me the hardest in my reading was a collection of the stories of the people on the inside. The book entitled "*102 Minutes: The Unforgettable Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers,*" where two reporters with meticulous detail tell the heart-stopping moments of those inside the Tower in the 102 minutes between the first plane crash and the collapse of the second tower, unflinchingly placing the reader in the minds

and hearts of those ordinary citizens who actually confronted our worst fears. Hundreds and hundreds of the stories of those inside the Tower on that day, reporting on what was it like for the regular people inside. The scenarios compete for our attention with one and another, one worse than the next: as we imagine how we would have felt trapped on the windswept roof, 107 floors above ground, flames leaping up from below. Or pressed against a window that wouldn't open. Or descending a darkened stairwell when a rumble began somewhere above us. Sometimes the littlest detail made all the difference.

Take for example, the simple story of Michael Nestor who held an elevator door as Liz Thompson and Geoffrey Wharton hurriedly approached just as they were leaving the restaurant at the top of the north tower. The three of them became the last people to get out of the Windows on the World restaurant alive that day, and only because one of them had the common courtesy to hold the door open that saved the lives of other two. Or the secretary who stopped for a cigarette break while her friends went on ahead; they perished, and she survived, all because of a cigarette break. Or Janet Whilton who had a friend visiting her office that morning, and how she forgot to leave permission for her friend to come up to see her, so that she had to go down to security to fetch her, while everyone else on her floor died as the first plane struck.

Then there was Howard Kane, a controller for Windows on the World restaurant who was talking with his wife Lori when the first plane struck. He dropped the telephone, or so it seemed to her, because suddenly she heard sounds of clamor and alarm and anxiety on his end of the phone. She thought perhaps he was having a heart attack. Then she heard a woman screaming in the background, "Oh, my god, we're trapped," and then she heard her husband calling out her name, "Lori!" And then another man picked up the phone and said, "There's a fire. We have to call 911," and hung up. And that was the last time Lori ever heard from her husband.

Or Stanley Praitnath, who worked for a Japanese bank on the 81st floor of the south tower. One of the first to evacuate after the first plane hit tower one, he was told in the lobby to return to his desk and did as he was told. By 9:02 a.m. he was back upstairs, talking to a colleague in the Midwest: "As he spoke, Praitnath spun his seat around so he was facing in the direction of the window . . . From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed an unfamiliar shape on the horizon. Praitnath turned slightly, to look square out the window and saw another airplane. It was heading toward his office, toward his window, it seemed. He dived under his desk, screaming to God, as his colleague in Chicago listened on the phone and watched the television screen in horror."

Then there is the story of Jan Demczur, a window washer stuck in an elevator with five other men on the 50th floor of the north tower when the first plane hit. They pried open the elevator doors, and found themselves facing a blank wall, trapped in the express elevator shaft with no openings. Demczur, who had worked in construction, could tell the shaft was lined with wallboard. So, using the metal edge of the squeegee he was carrying as part of his equipment, he painstakingly scraped away at the wall. Then, his hands trembling, he dropped the squeegee, and it disappeared down the shaft. But using the handle of another tool, he was able to break through the remaining wallboard, and then some ceramic tiles, and then he and his fellow passengers squeezed through the opening and into a bathroom on the 50th floor, and they escaped down the stairs. Or Frank De Martini, the Port Authority construction manager, with his crew of Pete Negrón, Carlos DaCosta and Pablo Ortiz, saved at least 70 people in the north tower, even radioing out the first, ominous reports of the damage the fire was causing to the building's steel frame, which was melting in the heat, reports that appear to have gone largely unheeded.

Some of the stories were heroic, others just tragic. There was Abe Zelmanowitz, who after the first plane struck, decided to stay with his friend Ed Beyea, because the elevators stopped working shortly after the first attack, and his friend Ed was

paralyzed and wheelchair-bound and could not get out otherwise. So, Abe stayed with him to the very end, dying together. Then there was the 24-year-old security guard Robert Gabriel Martinez, who was assigned to the 78th floor of the south tower that day because he was a few minutes late to work, and even so he refused to abandon his post as he ushered others away to safety; or the 72-year-old Port Authority construction inspector Tony Savas, who, after being trapped in a smoky elevator for half an hour was rescued, and the 72-year-old bounded out asking, "What do you need me to do?" and who insisted, when he was finally pulled aside by the paramedics that he had a 'second wind' and wanted to go back in to help. "Let me go," he said. "Let me go back." Other stories are darker, as the writers suggest that not all the people who leapt from the upper floors of the towers that day did so of their own volition; some were pushed by those desperate for their place by a window and a breath of fresh air

Again and again, in the reading of their stories, the stories of those who were *inside* the Twin Towers that fateful day, one finds oneself moved to the point of tears and dismay, often by the smallest detail, like the story of the firefighter, Danny Suhr, who was killed by a falling body before he could even get into the south tower.

Oh God, why did some make it out that day, and not others? Why were some saved, but not all? Remarkably out of the some 14,000 people in the Twin Towers at the time of the first attack, more than 11,000 did get out, but not everyone. And while those who did survive were bounding down the stairs and out the fire exits to get out, a brave many others, fire fighters and paramedics and police, were bounding up the stairs into the burning Towers, never to be seen again. Oh, there was so much pain and agony that day.

The book reminded me in many ways of my favorite Christmas movie, Frank Capra's once forgotten, "It's A Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart. It was the first movie Frank Capra made after returning from service in World War II, and he wanted it to be special - he wanted it to be a celebration of the lives and dreams of America's ordinary citizens, who tried the best they could to do the right thing by themselves and their neighbors. And how little things we do, or don't do, can have enormous consequences in the lives of others, though they often gone unknown to us, or unseen by them. There's the obvious drama of George rescuing his younger brother from a fall through the ice, but there's also young George bravely working in the pharmacy when the pharmacist gets news of his son's death overseas, and young George confronting his wrath about whether he had messed up another person's prescription that would have

killed them. The viewer can really best see what an impact one insignificant life like George's had on his community through on the screen visit after George wishes he had never been born and sees his community untouched by him.

None of us really understand or can know the impact we have on each other's lives, for good and for ill, in small little actions or hurtful words, we make and break one another. As on the fateful day twenty years ago, little things made all the difference, like holding the elevator door.

And so on this day, Jon Lafleur, let it be understood as you retire from your position here at St. John's as organist, that you have no real idea of the impact that your life and ministry has had on us over those many months, on this congregation, and in this community. You have touched so many lives here in so many ways. And so, following your example, may we all do the best we can, may we all simply try to be kind to one another, try not to shame, blame or criticize self or other, as we hope for best, and trust in God's love and mercy to see us all through to the end. AMEN.