



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Sacred Act of Remembering

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 11, 2020

Based on Genesis 9:14-16; Hebrews 10:32-36; Matthew 16:24-28

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

In the Book of Genesis, God tells God's people, "I will remember. I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." After the great flood, God promised never again to destroy the earth and God remembered God's promise.

Remembering is also at the core of the human experience. One of the cruelest disabilities of all is to slowly lose the carefully gathered memories of a lifetime. Elie Wiesel observed, "Without memory there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future."

Remembering is what we do. We remember our childhoods. We remember the costly lessons we learned growing up. We remember the great kindnesses expressed to us over our lives, just as we cannot forget the cruelties we have sometimes expressed to others.

Worship, liturgy is, in fact, the theater of remembering; it is the playhouse of recalling the great acts of God through history.

And, of course, we remember our losses and our grief; the relationships that have been taken from us by death. The suddenness of the deaths of 9/11, the catastrophic numbers, the comparative youth of the victims: all contributed to the massive impact this tragedy had upon our families, our city, our nation, and the world. After all these years, 9/11 still reverberates in our memories.

Nineteen years is a long time to hold onto a memory. The details can begin to fade a little around the edges. Last year at this service, I was struck by the number of young firefighters in attendance who would have little or no personal memories of 9/11. They were simply too young. And yet they are not too young to know the cost of suffering and loss. They are not too young to remember the story.

And the story is as epic as it is poignant.

- In response to a brutal act of terrorism, heroic firefighters, who understood the risks, kept climbing those stairs in the hopes they might save lives at the top of the twin towers.
- Brave police officers did not fail to answer the call.
- Courageous emergency medical technicians responded to the alarm and placed themselves in harm's way. (And, in a remarkable footnote, so many of those who responded were not even on duty at the time the call went out!)

My God, literally, my God, what bravery! How can we recall it without weeping? Can any of us say we have been *unaffected* by these acts of self-sacrifice? Can any of us say this devotion to duty, this honorable calling, has not, *in some deep way*, changed us?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews invited his readers to recall their hard sufferings and their struggles. He wanted them to remember their abuses and their persecutions. He invited them to recall how they had accepted their losses knowing that they have themselves possessed something better and more lasting.

The thing better and more lasting the early Christians possessed was their faith. The thing better and more lasting these first responders possessed was their sense of purpose. Their vocation, literally their calling, was to risk their lives for the purpose of saving other lives. It is the one thing that makes the losses of 9/11 bearable. Those unspeakable losses were not for nothing. They hold meaning.

The anonymous author of Hebrews, coming a generation after the apostle, counsels the faith community, "Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised."

A friend of mine lost his wife to cancer after a long and valiant struggle. And, after a time, he remarried a quite remarkable woman. And, because he and I are close, I was bold enough to ask him what it was like to still be grieving the death of his former wife, while he was entering into this happy, new beginning.

And he told me, "The bitter is always mixed together with the sweet. There are wonderful, happy moments—authentic moments of joy and wonder in my life—and there are sad, heart-breaking moments. They are all mixed in together with one another, the bitter and the sweet." I often think back on that conversation. The bitter and the sweet are always mixed together.

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

A life given in the service of others is never truly lost. A life given for the common good, a life given for a higher purpose, is never wasted. It stands on, forever, a brilliant, shining light. It stands on, forever, the grand example of what we can all do and who we all can become. It stands on, forever, as an invitation to achievable greatness.

No firefighter I have ever met is comfortable with the term "hero." But Scholar Joseph Campbell once wrote, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself."

You see, you can seek to do everything for yourself in this life, and you can seek to save yourself from every harm, and it doesn't matter if you're a firefighter or an insurance agent, a policeman or a superhero, a first-responder or a waitress, you will eventually lose your life. But when you lose your life for the sake of others, when you lose your life for someone in need, it will never, ever, ever be lost. You will live on—as the brave heroes we honor today will live on—in our memories forever.

Twenty years from now, fifty years from now, one hundred years from now, people will still be telling this story.

They will remember. We will remember.

Amen.

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