

Pentecost 17, Proper 19, Year C, 2013  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Wednesday morning  
was another morning just like the one  
twelve years ago, bright and clear,  
nothing in the air  
to hint of possible danger.

I remember thinking how glorious the weather was  
that September morning  
as I drove down the highway toward Philadelphia Airport,  
on my way to a job interview in Austin.

I never made it to Texas,  
but unlike those who died in the four hijacked planes  
I was simply stranded in Atlanta for a few days  
before flying home again when the airspace opened.

On Wednesday  
I initially forgot what day it was.  
It wasn't until I turned on the TV while I was having breakfast,  
and heard those names being read, one by one,  
that the memories flashed back.  
I recognized some of the names  
that we had read  
Sunday by Sunday  
at the Cathedral in Trenton.  
I remembered the grieving families I met  
at the Australian consulate.  
I heard the name of Deb's brother-in-law.

Each of us  
have our own memories of that day.  
Some of us  
lost families, work colleagues, or friends;  
others of us  
volunteered a Ground Zero;  
all of us  
remember the utter disbelief and horror  
and the questioning

of how this could happen.

But as time passes  
other questions begin to rise,  
questions about the connection between faith  
and violence,  
about death  
and salvation.  
And many of the age-old questions  
reappear  
with added  
urgency.

For me, the primary question that came up was,  
What about all those people who died? Did they have faith in Christ? Are they safe with God?

It's tempting  
when you have questions like that  
to go searching in Scripture  
to try to find answers.  
Often  
we can't find them, because our Scriptures were written  
in a different time and context  
and so don't offer  
nice neat specific answers.

But other times  
we come across something  
that offers, if not answers,  
deep wisdom  
for our searching.

When I read  
our New Testament reading set for today  
I discovered  
some of that deep wisdom  
that might indeed  
speak to some of our questioning  
around this anniversary.

First, a bit of background.  
Today  
we begin seven weeks of readings

from the letters to Timothy.  
These two letters,  
like the one to Philemon last week  
are personal letters,  
this time  
from a church leader, traditionally thought to be Paul,  
to Timothy.  
Timothy is first mentioned  
in the book of Acts  
where he is described as the son of a Jewish woman - we find out later in the second letter to  
Timothy  
that his mother's name is Eunice, and his grandmother is Lois.  
Timothy's father was Greek;  
that meant  
that he was able to move easily between the Greek and Jewish cultures,  
something that was probably useful in his ministry.

When Paul first met Timothy,  
it was in Lystra, in modern day Turkey,  
and Paul invited him  
to join him  
on his missionary journeys.

But by the time this letter is written, it seems that  
Timothy is in Ephesus, working with the church there, and he is struggling. And so Paul's letter  
is one of encouragement  
and advice.  
He urges Timothy to continue his ministry in Ephesus, even though people are getting distracted  
by all kinds of strange teachings,  
and to focus on sound teaching,  
the core of the Christian faith.

And then, in the reading we heard today,  
Paul reminds Timothy  
of his own story.  
He reminds him  
of how he, Paul,  
was originally an opponent of the first Christians.  
Paul had persecuted them; he'd been involved in violence against them. And then he says,  
"But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord  
overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

Paul received mercy

because he acted ignorantly  
in unbelief.

Now, you remember Paul's story.  
He was a Pharisee,  
highly educated  
in Jewish law and faith.  
He stood on the sidelines as a young man  
while Stephen was stoned to death.  
He preached against Jesus and against Christians.  
He persecuted them.  
He dragged them off to prison.  
He threatened to murder them.  
The first Christians were afraid of him,  
and kept their doors locked against him.

But then,  
for no apparent reason,  
not because he had done anything to deserve it,  
in fact, quite the opposite,  
Jesus Christ appeared to Paul  
on the road to Damascus,  
and Paul couldn't help  
but believe.

Until that point  
Paul's ignorance of Christ  
had been deliberate.  
His unbelief  
determined.

But still, still Christ came to him  
in grace,  
and Paul was transformed  
by the faith and love  
of Christ.

But this experience  
is not restricted to Paul.  
He goes on to generalize.  
"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Christ's whole purpose,

the reason for the incarnation,  
is to save people, to bring them  
to God.  
And not just good people.  
Christ comes  
to save sinners,  
people who have acted  
contrary to the goodness of God.

Remember the parable we heard from Jesus' mouth today?  
If you are a shepherd, and you lose one sheep,  
do you just write it off?  
Or do you make sure your other ninety nine are safe, then go off after the one?  
Or if you lose some money,  
won't you clean your house carefully,  
sweeping the corners and under the bed and behind the fridge,  
to search for it?  
It's common sense.

And Christ is no different.  
Christ comes looking  
for the lost.  
Christ comes  
to save sinners.  
And of course, that means all of us  
in varying degree.

I don't think there is anyone here who could say  
that they had never done anything  
wrong,  
never said a sharp word,  
or thought a negative thought,  
or failed to love.

We are all sinners. And Christ came  
to save us.

But Paul goes on. “  
“I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience,  
making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.”

Paul is an example, an extreme one,  
of Christ's willingness to come after us, to search us out,

to find us,  
to welcome us.  
And because Paul's case is so extreme,  
his example lets us see the fullness of Christ's patience.  
Remember, Paul  
heard the story of Jesus  
when Stephen preached  
before he was stoned.  
And he knew enough  
to be able to identify followers of Jesus  
when he persecuted them.

He wasn't like the first disciples  
who heard Jesus say,  
"Follow me."  
He resisted. He resisted  
for quite a while.

The preaching of the apostles  
that according to Acts  
led to thousands being baptized  
had no effect on him.  
Paul  
had no intention  
of following Jesus.

But Christ was patient.  
And eventually  
when the time was right,  
appeared to him,  
and Paul heard,  
and finally, finally,  
became a follower,  
and then a leader.  
Christ is patient.  
Christ can, Christ will  
wait  
for us to turn  
to him.

So what of those questions?  
What about all those people who died? Did they have faith in Christ? Are they safe with God?  
And what about all those

throughout the world  
 who die  
 without knowing Christ?

Most often,  
 when people try to answer those questions,  
 they appeal to the gospel of John, to those verses that many of us committed to memory in  
 Sunday School.

John 14:6: Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except  
 through me."

John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in  
 him should not perish but have eternal life."

They seems to be exclusive. Belief in Christ is the only way.

Yet on the other hand, we have the words in chapter eleven of the letter to the Hebrews, which  
 we read a few weeks ago.

"By faith our ancestors received approval."

In other words, those great heroes of the Old Testament  
 had faith in God.

They didn't have faith in Christ. They couldn't. They lived before him.

But they believed what they knew of God,

and God did the rest. God treated them

as if

they had believed in Christ.

And that's the paradox of our faith.

Christ is the way to God.

But God is gracious, embracing those  
 who have had no chance to know God.

And then we add in Paul's words in 1 Timothy.

He isn't answering our specific questions  
 in his letter to Timothy.

But he develops, he stretches out  
 those ideas we find in John.

Yes, Christ is the way to God.

And yes, God is gracious, embracing those  
 who have had no chance to know God.

But God

is also patient.

Incredibly so.

God never gives up  
on anyone.

Somewhere between those  
who know and love Jesus and serve him with their whole lives,  
to whom God is gracious,  
and those  
who never had a chance to know about Jesus  
but to whom God is also gracious,  
and those who are struggling,  
who can't quite believe,  
and with them,  
God is patient  
and God is gracious.

None of us knows  
the exact details  
of what will happen to us  
after we die.  
But we trust in the grace of God  
who has promised us  
eternal life.  
And for all those  
whose faith - or struggles with it - is known to God alone,  
we trust God.  
Because God  
is patient  
and loving  
and merciful,  
and above all,  
God is gracious, welcoming us all, sinner and saint alike,  
to feast  
at his table.