

## **Many and One**

Rev. John Allen

Over the past few days our nation has been reflecting on the twenty-year anniversary of the September 11th attacks.

Beginning with the town's observance on Friday evening, and throughout the day yesterday, I have heard lots of people sharing both the extraordinary and ordinary stories of that day.

Stories of profound tragedy, stories of uncommon heroics, and stories of some very routine ways in which we as fellow humans offered care and compassion to one another.

A few of the stories from Friday's town observance stood out to me.

There was the story that the keynote speaker from the NYPD shared of the extraordinary heroics of his good friend who he last saw rushing back into one of the towers to save more people before it collapsed.

Eamon Agdassi a representative of Milton's B'hai community, shared a story from his sister who on September 11th was fleeing her downtown office trying to reach her home on 96th St. when she was picked up by a stranger in his car, who already had two other strangers in the car with him to give them a ride home.

And Representative Brandy Fluker Oakley, who was a Freshman at Syracuse University in September of 2001, shared her memory of folks lining up at payphone to check in with family, and those who had calling cards standing beside the phones to help others make their calls.

And of there are other stories from that day that always stand out to me.

Like the small town of Gander, Newfoundland with a population 10,400. During the unprecedented closure of US airspace on that day, 53 planes carrying 6,579 passengers, from all around the world, were diverted to land in Gander. A town with only 500 hotel rooms.

Over the next few days, while these passengers were stranded. The community closed all of its High Schools to form emergency shelters. People from town volunteered to cook meals, do laundry, and set up cots. Elderly and pregnant passengers were welcomed as guests in private homes.

A few locals who owned boats circulated sign up sheets for folks to go on excursions, if they wanted to get out during the day and explore the area. And the local bakery operated 24/7 making bread.

So I think that if we took time yesterday to remember September 11. To remember with sorrow the lives lost, the innocence stolen, the safety shattered.

It would also be a good idea today for us to remember September 12.

To remember how in the days after the attacks, so many people, from so many walks of life, looked more deeply into their hearts to find compassion for one another, and looked more closely at their own lives through the lens of generosity to wonder what they might have to offer to the common good.

For some, it was answering a call to extraordinary sacrifice with uncommon bravery. But for most, it meant realizing that we all were in a greater position to be of service than we might have realized before. Even if what we had to give was a pint of blood, a seat in our car, a few dollars, or even just a loaf of bread to a stranded traveler.

It is not inevitable that tragedy will bring out this kind of action in us. There is another story that sticks with me from September 11. One of professors in Seminary, a Muslim woman, shared with our class once that the days after those attacks were the first time in her adult life she left home without her hijab. Because she had already heard that people wearing distinctive head coverings of any kind, whether Muslim, or Sikh, were becoming targets of hate, and victims of violence.

It is possible for moments of great fear and uncertainty to awaken real ugliness within us, individually and collectively. But it is also possible for it to awaken profound generosity.

So today I want us to commemorate September 12, and to remember that just as on that day we have a choice to make this day. And that is whether we will respond to the fear and uncertainty of the world around us with a generous spirit that asks how we can make life habit gentler and easier for our neighbors? Or are we going to react by recoiling into comfortable myopias, and small imaginations?

This morning's reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us that each of us have gifts that are innate to who God created us to be. Among us as a human family there are many gifts that flow from the same source.

Each of us has a gift that can take a place in the healing and building up of a better world.

One of the things I love about the story of Gander is how it makes this so obvious. In the face of an almost unimaginable crush of immediate human need, something was activated in their midst. And person by person, group by group, institution by institution, they figured it out.

No one could have done that on their own. And the diversity of their ways of assisting was essential to the success of their shared effort.

Many gifts. One body.

My time as your pastor is coming to a close, in a just a few weeks we will say farewell.

One thing I have been so grateful for in this congregation is the way you use the variety of gifts in your midst in service of the shared work of this church.

Whether it is lending your voice to the choir, arranging flowers, calling a friend in the hospital, cooking BBQ for a crowd, teaching children a craft, cleaning all those little

communion cups, or doing the dishes after coffee hour. Whether it is reading financial reports, leading a small group, state-managing a Christmas pageant, or running the AV system. Or knitting a blanket for our baptisms. Or remaining steadfast in lifting up the prayers of this community to the heart of God.

All of it works together to be something so much greater.

I believe that this is one of the most important truths things that a church like ours has to show to the world. That when all our gifts are pulled together and empowered by God's Spirit, they become something greater than the sum of their parts.

It isn't always perfect. It will never be perfect. But, as I remember September 12 today. I remember the simple power and simple beauty that lies behind everyone offering what they have, and doing what they can, to make life a bit more gentle for one another.

That is a gift that you have shown me in our time together.

And I trust it is a gift you will continue to offer our community and our world.