

CGGC eNews: 9-11 Fifteen Years Later

September 9, 2016

This coming Sunday will mark the fifteenth anniversary of the 9-11 terror attacks on the United States. For many of us, we can vividly recall where we were when we first heard of the attacks. I had grown up hearing my parents and other adults talk of the John F. Kennedy assassination in a comparable fashion. I remember what a beautiful, soon-to-be fall day it was in northwest Ohio; the sky was a brilliant blue that morning.

I was at my desk at Winebrenner Theological Seminary when Dr. Les Lightner came into the administration building (the seminary was still located on East Melrose Ave. – two years before the move to the present location adjacent to the University of Findlay) and informed everyone that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center in New York City. This was before the days of live streaming on the internet and so we didn't have a lot of information immediately available, but I distinctly remember thinking or imagining that it must have been a small private plane like a Cessna or Beechcraft.

It was the first day of a new fall semester at WTS and we were busy with the preparations necessary to welcome students back to campus. Before the news began to unfold that morning, I received a call from Dave Green, who served as the Executive Director of the Great Lakes Conference Churches of God. Dave asked me if I was available for pulpit supply at a local church for the coming Sunday and I agreed to do so.

The news continued to develop that morning: another plane hit the World Trade Center, a reported plane crash in western Pennsylvania, more reports of a passenger plane hitting the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. and the horrifying news that both towers of the World Trade Center had collapsed. What began as a beautiful late-summer day was unfolding with an increasingly clear understanding that we were a nation under attack.

The seminary cancelled classes and sent the staff home a little early that day. I was a bachelor back then and one of the strongest memories I have of that day was the sense that I didn't want to be alone: I went to dinner with a friend, I called my parents, I called my brother, and I called a couple friends that evening in an effort to not be alone.

In the days following 9-11, I spent a lot of time reflecting on what God might be saying to me personally as well as to the church at large through the tragic events of that week. Here are the three most penetrating insights I received in the days that followed the attacks:

1. A greater sense of my own personal depravity and my desperate need for Christ. While many questioned "what kind of evil men could do such things", I had the unshakeable sense that I knew that same evil in my own heart all too well. Left to my own devices, without the love and grace of Jesus, I'm prone to the same kind of evil acts, the same kind of heinous behavior toward my fellow humankind. Without the unmerited grace of Jesus at work within me, I'm inclined to the same sort of darkness, hatred, evil and hopelessness.
2. The foolishness and folly of the idol of power. The United States enjoyed (and still enjoys) unparalleled power: economic power, military power and political power and I tended to trust that power, take comfort in that power and find security in that power. All of the security and confidence that I placed in the power of my home country was stripped away in a matter of hours through the events of 9-11. Our power and strength were not enough to protect us from this terrible tragedy. Power, whether it's the power of this nation or my own personal power isn't trustworthy.

3. The foolishness and folly of the idol of wealth. The United States enjoyed (and still enjoys) unparalleled wealth. Power and wealth tend to go hand in hand – with wealth bringing power and power bringing opportunities for more wealth. In the weeks that followed 9-11 we witnessed a lot of wealth disappear from our economy as the markets collapsed and our country entered into a new war effort. Our wealth as a nation did not protect us against this attack and proved to be quite fragile and momentary in the financial aftermath that followed the attacks. Again, I'm inclined to look to wealth for my comfort and sense of security and the events of that week proved that wealth is fleeting and ultimately untrustworthy.

I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer and so it didn't occur to me until late in the week that I could not enter the pulpit the following Sunday without addressing the events of the previous week. I couldn't just pull something old out of the file or somehow ignore what our entire culture had been focused upon for the past several days. My text for that Sunday came from 1 Peter 4:7-11.

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Peter was writing to brothers and sisters who had every reason to believe that the end was near because their suffering was great. While some probably believed that 9-11 was the beginning of the end, I did not; but we were a people experiencing a new degree of suffering which required an appropriate response. I shared the following themes from the above text:

1. Be clear-minded and self-controlled so you can pray.
2. Love each other deeply.
3. Show hospitality.
4. Use your gifts to serve others (which works against the inclination of self-absorption).
5. Recognize the God-inspired moments and opportunities where our obedience results in God receiving glory, honor and praise.

So why do I share all of this today? Sunday will mark fifteen years since that tragic morning. Many of our enemies who were involved in those wicked plans and actions have been captured or killed, and others have risen up to take their place. Our country has been fighting a war on terror that continues on to this very day, with no feasible end in sight. Similar attacks have been carried out in other places in the world with alarming regularity. While we experienced a refreshing sense of unity as a nation in the days following the 9-11 attacks, we appear to be more fractured and more polarized than ever today. Some look toward the November election with an impending sense of doom and conviction that the end must be near.

I think Peter's exhortation to the church is still the right word for us today. It's a strong reminder for us to live as God's people, as His kingdom agents in this world. It moves us beyond the empty promises of nationalism and reminds us who we really are and what our mission is really all about. As much as we may love and appreciate our country and the benefits we enjoy as citizens, we're called to live as resident aliens (Hebrews 11:8-10, 1 Peter 2:9-12, John 17:14-18) as we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

This weekend will be filled with many remembrances, memorials and solemn ceremonies to mark the events of that tragic day fifteen years ago. We need to mourn and we need to remember, but most of

all, we need to be reminded of our call as citizens of the kingdom of God and commit to give our lives to His mission. Our world is groaning for a hope that will not fail or disappoint. Jesus sends us into this world to demonstrate and proclaim the hope that's only found in Him! Let's live well brothers and sisters.

Christ's Peace,

Lance

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