

## A Service of Evening Prayer September 11, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

### *Real Loss, Real Love*

*Romans 8:31-39*

*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NIV)*

### + In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit +

It was a morning that still doesn't seem quite real. The ringing of the phone woke me up. It was my wife, calling from Wisconsin, where she was visiting her mom. "Turn on the TV," she said. "There's something happening at the World Trade Center."

I looked at my alarm clock. It was blank. The power had gone out in our neighborhood (unrelated to the other events of that day). "I can't," I replied. "The power is out."

I don't know if it was because of the strange power outage that morning or because of my answering the phone still half-asleep, but that morning doesn't seem quite real, even a year later.

After a few minutes, the power came back on, and I joined the rest of the nation in seeing what was happening. But even the television coverage of what happened a year ago—I'm not sure if that makes the events seem more real or less, if it makes them seem like just another TV show or movie.

Of course, these events that we commemorate today are real. They really happened. They are facts. They are facts felt particularly by the families of those who were killed. Their losses are real. How many stories—each one gripping and heart-rending—have we heard in the last year of loved ones who were killed? Stories of babies without fathers, moms, sisters and brothers, fiancés—we could go on. Sadly, we could go on for a long time. Did you hear the 2801 names being read at the World Trade Center this morning? These were the names of real people, like you and me. Their losses are real.

On this night, we turn to the Word of God. We hear a man speaking. Paul is his name. This man knows loss. He lists for us some of the losses that he knew: the loss of personal

security, the loss of physical comfort, the loss of food, the loss of clothing and shelter, and, Paul suspected, ultimately the loss of life. (He was right about that; he was executed.) And if we were to read more of his writings besides the section of his letter to the Romans I read earlier, we would hear about the loss of other things: sleep, health, and more. And Paul came close at times to losing hope as well.

It's interesting as you listen to Paul, isn't it, that he doesn't speak of these things (hardship, persecution, famine, danger, sword) as mere possibilities. He doesn't say, "In the unlikely event that you're going to have a hard and painful life..." He assumes that real pain and real loss will be our daily bread.

The events of a year ago remind us that this is true. (As if many of you needed a reminder that life is hard!) Loss and grief and pain—these things are real.

So what shall we say in response to this? What will we do in the face of these hard realities?

We will turn our minds and our hearts and our whole selves to something else that is every bit as real as the pain we feel, that our nation feels. This reality that I speak of—this reality, too, involves pain. It involves loss. It involves cruel and horrifying death. It involves God himself.

This reality, this real event, is symbolized by a cross. There God endured real pain. Jesus Christ, God made flesh, hurt and suffered there. And his suffering was real.

The reasons for the suffering of the past year—the purpose that lay behind it all is hidden from us. We don't know, do we, why all of this tragedy has occurred. But this real event, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ—for this we know the purpose. What drove Jesus to undergo real pain and real death was real love.

Real love for you and me led him there. There Jesus let himself be damned, let himself be considered the vilest sinner of all time—worse than any terrorist. There Jesus let himself be considered a sinner. Why? So that God wouldn't consider us to be sinners anymore. Jesus became our substitute. He was condemned on that cross, and as a result, we are set free. We are declared to be not guilty, our sins paid for by Jesus with his real suffering and his real death.

That's real love. Real love leads one person to die for another. Real love led Jesus to die. And more than that, to rise up again to life! Real love leads Jesus to pray to God the Father for you and me, reminding him that we are washed, that we are acquitted, that we are his children.

Death can't change that. Neither can life, which is often scarier than death! Nor can any terrorist, nor weapon of mass destruction. Nor anyone or anything else.

Last night I saw a news reporter interviewing people who had lost friends or family members in the World Trade Center attacks. Among them was a New York City chaplain, either from the Fire Department or the Police Department (I can't remember which). He said something to the rest of the people there about how God, though he seemed to be absent that terrible day, could have been present, leading thousands to safety, comforting people as they died, working in invisible ways. The reporter interrupted him to get reaction from the group. "Those words sound good," she said, "but how do they feel?"

I know what she was saying, don't you? When people are suffering, often the last thing they want to hear is someone claiming to have all the answers. Anything that's said comes off to them as a pious, pompous platitude. Sometimes, when people are hurting, the best thing we can do (as we learn in the Bible book of Job) is to sit with them and shut up.

But something bothers me about the reporter's words: "Those words sound good, but how do they *feel*?" Finally, if something is true, it's real. Our feelings don't make realities go away.

We all wish that the events of one year ago hadn't happened. But they did. They won't go away.

Neither will this cross.

Amen.