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Church of St. Tomas More, NYC  
Sept. 12, 2021**

**September 11th, 2021  
20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Attack on the Twin Towers**

*(Yesterday was the twentieth anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers. Today's Gospel speaks to us of the centrality of the Cross in our lives. On that day, as individuals, as a city, and as a nation, we were confronted by the Cross. On 9/11 I was the pastor of St. Peter's Church, located less than a block away from Ground Zero. Below is the homily I delivered on the first anniversary of the attack. Today I deliver it again, virtually unchanged, as the message then, I believe, is still worth hearing today.)*

On that most fearful summer morning [twenty years] ago, everything changed. Everything changed and yet nothing changed. Everything changed. We all lost someone or something that day, when 2800 lives were taken from us in a single barbaric act. Slain by murderers who did not even know their victims, cut down as they went about the most ordinary of activities. Some lost a family member, some lost a loved one, some a friend, others a colleague, a job, an apartment, a neighborhood, a sense of security. Our confidence in our very way of life was shattered in a few minutes. The carnage that we thought of as only happening in other parts of the world was now taking place around the corner. Each of us has experienced our own tragedies in life; that day we went through the unthinkable together. A city, a nation, a world watched in horror, but united in grief and beginning to reconnect in our shared sense of humanity.

Everything changed and yet nothing changed. The values that we held important the day before were even more treasured the day after: the values of family, of faith, of friends. For many it was only the support of family and friends, friends new and old, that helped them get through those difficult days. But today, we gather to remember and pray for those who perished, we look to another source, our faith, to provide us with some measure of comfort, and to enable us to build on the lessons that we have learned.

Jesus said, "Unless a grain of seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains just that grain of seed. But if that seed first dies, it produces much fruit." That is the challenge and the promise of faith—to see that what has all the appearances of death, disintegration and decay, possesses at the very same moment the signs of new life

emerging; it is to recognize that even as something is falling apart and breaking up, on a deeper level of something else is coming to be, trying to break through.

This past summer we saw on TV film footage of the terrible fires that were ravaging the forests of the American West. But the fact is that while those forests were being destroyed by the tremendous heat of the flames, those same flames were releasing seeds from the trees' interiors, seeds that would provide the possibility of a totally transformed and regenerated forest some years later. God the Creator and God the Redeemer witness to the same essential truth: the possibility of transformation from the ashes of terrible destruction. It is for us as disciples of Jesus to give flesh and form to the hope of rebirth and transformation in our lives and in our society.

Faith does not provide us with any special information. Faith is not there just to fulfill our fondest desires. Faith reveals what is there all the time, but what in our grief, our sorrow, our distraction, we are unable to recognize: that God is present even in the midst of human depravity to fashion something noble, something decent, something good. That is more than saying that good can come out of evil. Rather, it is to affirm that life and death are inextricably entwined in every aspect of existence, and that the forces of love, of goodness, of beauty will triumph, because God can draw meaning out of chaos. Nor is it to deny the unbearable sadness that still affects many even a year after that tragic day. Still, it may be a word we need to hear to begin to move on, to heal, and be healed, to live lives worthy of those who lost theirs.

On September 11 the world, as we used to know it, fell apart. But at the same time that we witnessed a terrible act of evil, we also saw incredible goodness, compassion and bravery. As the Twin Towers were being consumed in flames people, people were rushing from all over the city to be of help—police officers, EMS workers, firefighters. There were others, ordinary people who acted heroically that day—office workers who delayed their own escape to assist others; those who made sure all of their colleagues were safely evacuated before they left their posts. Incredible goodness in the face of terrible evil.

Prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> we were accustomed to look at the Twin Towers at the symbol of America's strength and power in the world of trade, commerce and finance. As those buildings turned to dust before our eyes, we came to look to each other to see where our true strength and power lie. It was in all those acts of compassion, those deeds of generosity and self-sacrifice that were performed that day and in the days, weeks and months afterward. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." He did not mean within us as simply within our hearts and minds—that would be too isolating, too private, too domestic. The Kingdom of God, the presence of God, is

found in those spaces between people when we come out of ourselves and connect with each other in the most simple but telling of human gestures of compassion.

George Bernard Shaw said of our city, "New York is a place half way between America and the world." The world has given America some of its finest sons and daughters who arrived on the docks not far from here to make a life for themselves and their children better than the one they left behind. On September 11 the children and grandchildren of those immigrants showed the world how a city composed of so many different races, creeds and ethnicities could come together, and so immediately respond to tragedy with such elemental decency and goodness.

But today [twenty years] later, we have to ask ourselves in what ways have we changed; how are we different? What was asked of us in those weeks immediately following 9/11? That we keep on flying, that we go shopping, and that we accept a generous tax cut. Surely the nobility of the lives that were lost would require more of us than that. At a time when the word "hero" was in danger of being devalued, when it had come to be associated chiefly with figures in the worlds of sport and entertainment, when wealth and celebrity seemed to be the ingredients that made heroes, we were given countless examples of bravery and courage by men and women whose pictures never appear on a magazine cover or Extra, Extra. They thought of others before thinking of themselves—a telling witness and antidote to our narcissistic age.

The tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> was perpetrated by human beings—evil, misguided—we leave to God the final judgment. But, no one can say that what happened that Tuesday was God's will. That day showed in dramatic counterpoint how human freedom can be used and abused. It showed the tremendous dignity and power God grants us mere human beings that we can exercise our freedom in such contrary ways. We too abuse God's gift if we do not exercise our freedom sufficiently, if we simply drift through our day on some kind of automatic pilot, responding only casually and indifferently to the challenges in front of us. In a telegram sent by Pope John Paul II [on Good Friday after 9/11] to those who took part in the Way of the Cross that came across Brooklyn Bridge and concluded near St. Peter's, he prayed that the "strength of love, justice, forgiveness and peace, might touch the American people." Each of us has to see how these values can find expression in our lives. How can we say we believe in the possibilities of transformation, unless we allow ourselves to be transformed; how can we say we believe in redemption, unless we live like a people redeemed; and how can we believe in change, unless we take the steps to change? Our faith, and all those good and decent people we lost [20 years] ago would ask no less of us.