

Fortunate are the Peacemakers

On the first anniversary of the violent actions we call "Nine-Eleven," Sue Rakoczy delivered the homily during morning liturgy in the Motherhouse worship space. The gospel of the day was the eight beatitudes that mark the opening of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:3-12).

The Greek word makarioi that is repeated in each of the Beatitudes is commonly translated as "blessed" or "happy." ("Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land" or "Happy are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.") Sue approached the Gospel reading by interpreting makarioi as "fortunate." Her interpretation propelled the scripture beyond the common terms into a new way of thinking about this Christian teaching.

The text of her homily follows.

September 11, 2001 has been called a "defining moment" in our lives. Some of you remember the "defining moments" of the 1940s: Pearl Harbor, World War II, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the death of President Franklin Roosevelt. All of us in this room remember November 22, 1963, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. And now we have another event, the terrorist attacks one year ago today.

During the past year people have often said that "nothing is the same". Certainly that is true for those who have lost family members, friends, colleagues. People of 83 countries died in the September 11 attacks. But also "nothing is the same" in the United States since the attacks have meant the loss of innocence, naivete together with a growing awareness that the United States is truly part of the world.

Last year I was where I usually live, in South Africa. And the view from there was very different. Even the naming of September 11th as 9/11 was strange since in South Africa and many other parts of the world the naming is not the 11th day of the ninth month but the 9th day of the 11th month. I was at a meeting at an Anglican theological college in another part of the country and my first knowledge of the attacks came as I walked through the student lounge on my way to the chapel for liturgy at 5 p.m. (11 a.m. in New York). The TV was on and a student said to me, "Sister Sue, your country is being destroyed." The screen said "America under attack" and like most people, I thought it was a movie--until I saw the CNN logo. But it struck me later that he had assumed that the U.S. was being destroyed.

In the days that followed, there was a variety of responses to the attacks. Sr. Judy Coyle and I received sympathy cards from two of the communities associated with St. Joseph's Theological Institute where we both teach. But there was also indifference and a lack of awareness of what had happened by both staff and students--similar I suppose to the response of some Americans to tragic events in far-away countries.

The South African government made a formal statement of condolence, but within two days some elements of the press began to write statements such as "It is too bad that all those people died, but it is a good thing that the US, the bully of the world, has finally gotten what it deserves."

Scripture: A Different Perspective

The view from the Scripture readings today is decidedly different. The prophet Micah speaks of turning swords into ploughshares, that nations will not lift up swords against each other, that all the people will form a unity as all will walk in the name of God.

We can contrast this perspective with the language we hear all around us: of war, the war on terrorism, actual war and the fracture of peoples--that nations are "either with us or against us."

September 11th has also been called a "defining moment" for this country. The Beatitudes from Matthew's gospel give us attitudes of heart for this "defining moment". The text which we heard uses the word "fortunate", rather than "happy" or "blessed". It would be extremely difficult to say to families who lost beloved members that they are "fortunate" in their loss. Yet we can speak of comfort in this time of sorrow as we mourn the loss of loved ones and of American innocence. What type of comfort have we offered each other this year?

"Fortunate are those who hunger and thirst for justice." We are challenged to recommit ourselves to this quest, to deepen our hunger and thirst for justice and peace which are central to our IHM life and ministry.

"Fortunate are those who are peacemakers." After September 11th there was much talk of revenge, much language full of hate for those who planned and carried out the attacks. The Gospel challenges us to new attitudes, to learn how to love one's enemies. How are we as Americans to respond to the awareness we now have of the world's hatred of the United States, attitudes which were very obvious in the South African press after September 11th and which I had experienced at the World Conference Against Racism which had been held a week earlier in South Africa? The recently-concluded World Summit on Sustainable Development gave more evidence of the hatred and loathing many people have for the United States. As Christians, what does it mean to "turn the other cheek" to such hatred? We each know that the Spirit's call to non-violence is a life-long transformation, not one of just twelve months.

Conclusion

How often have we heard in this past year that "nothing is the same" after September 11th. And this is very true. The Gospel calls us to emerge from any kind of pre-September 11th "cocoon" of safety and lack of awareness to make sure that we are always engaged with our world, aware of its hopes and joys, its sorrows and sufferings.

As I drove to Monroe this morning I was listening to the radio broadcast of the ceremonies at Ground Zero in New York. Governor George Pataki of New York read Lincoln's Gettysburg address and I was struck by the phrase "unfinished work." Indeed, there is much unfinished work ahead to make our world a planet of justice and peace.

This unfinished work is the transformation of our hearts into the non-violence and peace of Christ. It is the call to the IHM community to discover how to live the Beatitudes in our post-September 11th world. And it is the challenge to each of us to form circles of prayer, peace, solidarity and care for the least, living the charism entrusted to us through St. Alphonsus Liguori, Louis Florent Gillet and Theresa Maxis Duchemin as we live in a world in which "nothing is the same."

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(Texts: Micah 4:1-5; Matthew 5:3-12)