

**Evensong for Peace and Reconciliation – September 10, 2006**  
**The Rev. Jean Denton**

I have wanted to forget September 11, 2001. I have wanted to put it in the back of the attic of my mind, and be done it. But that's childish thinking.

I cannot forget.

9/11 will not be erased, either from my experience or from the memory of America. 9/11 won't be wiped away. It cannot be forgotten.

And so we are left having to integrate it, integrate it into ourselves and into our worldview. We are left having to weave 9/11 into our lives, this thread so dark and thick.

I remember the words from the prior of Holy Cross Monastery who was at Trinity Church Wall Street that fateful morning with others, including Rowan Williams. His email said, "Around 10:15, the plume from the collapse of Tower One had passed and the air was beginning to clear.... So we were taken outside, and this is where words begin to fail me. It was eerily quiet and we were the only people.... The ground was covered with... ash, mixed with papers..., shoes, ties, pens. .... We were directed south, and after a block, the ground started rumbling and there began the most unearthly sound I have ever heard. It was like thunder that just wouldn't stop. It was the collapse of the second tower, and I was sure we were all going to die...."

I remember the stories of a priest friend who worked at Ground Zero. She served as a chaplain, and when the firefighters found bodies, or, more often, body parts, they would call Janet over to bless them. The firefighters, most of them good Roman Catholics, told Janet, "We do Eucharist at 2 o'clock." When Janet, still stunned by the devastation her first day on the pile, hesitated, they asked, "You do that, don't you?" And with a box left by the Franciscans she found a way to make Eucharist – to celebrate the good news in the middle of God-forsaken desolation.

HOW do you find good news in this? HOW do you "re-member" – put the parts together – and make sense of the agony and offense?

In light of 9/11, the words of Jesus from Matthew sound glib—that talk about being blessed when we are reviled and persecuted, about being merciful and about being peacemakers, about loving our enemies.

But I do believe Jesus has something to say to us about responding to 9/11. Responding isn't knee-jerk; it is something considered, thought through and prayed through. Responding comes from an awareness, however tentative, of our own potential for good and for evil. Responding comes from a deeper place within ourselves.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies, so that you may be children of God."

Loving our enemies doesn't happen because we will it. Loving our enemies comes only when we know, really know, ourselves to be children of God, when we know, really know, that we are of God.

Let me use an image to describe what I mean. It's an image of an iceberg.

What we see above water is the tip, just the tip. We know there's more, but all we see is the tip. The tip of the iceberg is like our actions. We know there's more, but we can't see the motivation or the intention. We only see the tip. So, what's below the surface? What's behind our actions?

The first hidden layer is that of automatic responses, routine ways of operating, "old tapes" playing unconsciously in our minds. Our actions so often are reactions, springing from habits. A very human reaction to assault is seeking revenge, seeking, showing our power.

What creates our habits? I think it's the next deeper level, the psychological level that reflects how we see ourselves, who we really think we are, what internal strengths we draw upon, and what hurts have gone unhealed. Our self-image drives so much of what we think and practice, and thus so much of what we do.

But that's not as deep as the iceberg goes. There's yet another realm, deeper and more vast than all the rest. It's the spiritual realm. The questions there are: Who is God? How do we perceive God? Is God one who keeps a tally of deeds done, and punishes according to some divine standard? Is God one whose kindness we must earn by believing the right dogma?

Or is God the God that Jesus describes, a God of mercy and love, “sending rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous” and making “his sun to rise on the evil and the good?” Does God whisper from these depths, “I love you – and there’s nothing you can do to change that!”

Only when we get down to that deep spiritual level and spend time there, letting God’s love flow over us and through us and under us and around us, can we possibly begin to love ourselves, and then develop habits of love, and then act in ways that love the world.

We do have the potential for that. It’s in our DNA—we ARE children of God! We can see the world with soft eyes. We can respond to the world’s hurts with compassion. We can seek to know our fellow travelers on this road of life, to find out what makes them tick, and who they are, and why they do the things they do.

Loving doesn’t mean expecting our enemies to change. I can’t make others change; the only one I can change is myself. That’s the extent of my power, and yours. One thing though we can change is our expectations of others. We can expect others to be who they are, formed into who they are by their lived experience, different from our own. Loving our enemies means remembering that God loves us all. Period. There is no earning and there is no losing God’s love.

In remembering, and in returning to our deepest selves that are hidden in God, we can respond. We can name our pain and hurt and act, not out of retribution or hate, but out of compassion for the world’s deepest hurt. Is anything harder? Probably not. Do we really have a viable alternative to loving our enemies? Probably not.

We cannot forget. We cannot forget the devastation and the violation, the people who died. We cannot forget those who perceive us the enemy.

And we cannot forget who we are, either. We cannot forget Whose we are. We cannot forget Jesus’ command to love.