

Who Are We Anyway?

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Homecoming Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

September 12, 2021 – 9/11 Remembrance Weekend

Text: Matthew 5:14-16

When I was mapping out the calendar as I was planning for this fall, I admit I did not make the connection that Sunday, September 12 would be preceded by Saturday, September 11, and the 20th Anniversary commemorations of the 9/11 attacks on our country. That's just not where my mind went. Instead, I was just looking at the second Sunday in September as the traditional time when we re-engage with the more traditional worship and church calendars after the more relaxed and laid-back rhythms of summer. I was aware of the increasing rhetoric in recent weeks about 9/11 and am even taking an online course called "Oh God What Now? Christianity 20 Years after 9/11." But still, the immediate juxtaposition of September 11 and all the weight it holds in our minds and hearts with today just did not click for me. Well, at least it didn't until I got a call last Tuesday with an invitation to participation in the Westerly commemoration of 9/11 held yesterday on the steps of Town Hall. Then, as my week unfolded, it struck me for the first time – 20 years! Wow? Has it really been that long?

Yes, it has been 20 years which somehow manages to feel like ages ago and the blink of an eye at the same time. 20 years ago I was serving on the staff of Newman Church in Rumford, as the Minister for Education and Family Life. Peter was teaching at a collaborative school in North Providence. Jack was just starting high school and Amanda was just starting college. Life was good, or so it seemed on that amazingly gorgeous day in 2001. Then the bottom fell out of our lives as news of the four planes and their deadly ends flashed across television screens and we were left to wonder what was happening – and what might happen next. We were frightened and horrified and sad and angry. At Newman we opened our doors wide and kept them open into the night with the three ministers on staff taking shifts to offer solace and support to anyone who came in those open doors. And in they came. In fits and starts at first and then more as the day wore on and people realized what we were doing. I will never forget one person who came into the church, almost stumbling down the aisle.

He walked down to the front and collapsed into a pew and began sobbing. He sobbed for almost an hour. Soon more people came, and more crying filled the sanctuary as people collapsed with fear and grief in God's house because in that moment, that is precisely what that historic landmark church had become – God's house, a place of safety, a place to lay bare all the grief and fear of an unbearable moment.

I will never forget that day and the gift and privilege of being on the front lines for so many people in grief that day. The prayer service we offered that night was well attended, and again tears filled the room. But something happened beyond tears, something moved us beyond fear and almost indescribable grief. God's presence filled that space on that evening 20 years ago as candles flickered and people found a safe space to begin processing the unthinkable. It was one of the most profound moments in ministry I have experienced and yet, oddly, I had forgotten about it until now – September 11, 2021. Because life goes on, whether we think it will or not. The clock continues to tick. The calendar pages continue to turn. The holidays continue to creep up on us and then slip by. The milestones of life – birthdays and anniversaries, graduations and weddings, baptisms and funerals – they all continue to happen. Dear ones, the bottom felt out of our lives that day, and yet we continued on. And now, here we are, 20 years later marveling that two decades have passed. How is that possible?

The more intriguing question for me as I ponder the 20 years since that awful, life shattering day, is who have we become as those years slipped by? That, dear ones, is the question which needs our attention in these turbulent and troubled times we face each morning as a new day dawns. I saw a meme on Facebook this past week which startled me when I saw it. Simple and elegant, it simply stated "I remember September 12, 2001." Initially, my reaction was – "September 12???" Then the more I thought about it, the more I realized what this person was saying. On September 12, 2001 – the day after 9/11 – we woke up to find ourselves in what felt like a newly revitalized country. People were flying flags and scrambling to be of assistance in any way they could think of to the victims of the 9/11 attacks and their families. In our area especially, some of our local first responders even went to New York City to man the fire stations so the NYFD personnel could be at the Twin Towers to search for lost colleagues.

Blood drives happened in local hospitals. Prayer services happened every day of the week and churches were packed on Sundays. September 12 felt like an odd new beginning, like maybe something good could come out of something so awful, that maybe we could finally learn to set our differences aside and focus on the common good together. Maybe, just maybe on September 12, 2001, we wanted to believe that America was somehow being reborn into all that she had been in generations past.

Unfortunately, we now know all that unity and working together was just a brief anomaly as the blame game began all too soon. In a matter of hours after the 9/11 attacks self-appointed vigilantes began attacking anyone who looked like they must be Muslim as all members of the Islamic faith were suddenly viewed with deep suspicion. Some were even attacked and killed for no reason other than who people thought they were. So too, the war hawks in Congress soon began the march to what eventually became the longest war in American history – the 20 year war in Afghanistan finally ended just last month. An entire generation of our young people have grown up in a world punctuated by violence perpetrated by fanatics of every religion. Entire populations of people around the world – refugees as we call them – have been displaced, often through no fault of their own, as local warlords and gang leaders fight for control of land and resources. Scrambling to find a roof over their heads, food to eat, water to drink and a place to raise their families, we need to remember that in the last 20 years there are young people the ages of our children and grandchildren who have only ever known life in refugee camps as they flee war, famine, and now pandemic.

So, there is a question for us to ponder on this September 12, 20 years after that day when we hoped and dreamed that our beloved country was becoming a new creation in the aftermath of unthinkable tragedy. Our question 20 years later is a simple one – who are we anyway? Who are we as September 12, 2021 dawns and we consider all that has happened in our world, in our country and in our lives in the past 20 years? Who are we as we confront the reality that the unity we thought we had on this day twenty years ago was more ephemeral than the fog on the beach on a rainy morning? Who are we as we consider not only who we are today but who do we hope, who do we dream of being, on September 12 twenty years from now? What do we need to do address

the almost unimaginable issues confronting our country in this moment when our health care systems are overwhelmed not by victims of planes crashing into buildings but people sick and dying with Covid just because they think their personal freedom not to receive the vaccine or wear a mask is more important than other people's lives? How do we create some sort of unity with these people whom God tells us are equally beloved of God when they are so clearly very, very different from us and how we want to relate to the world? In short, dear ones, how do we become who God needs us to be in this moment? What is even possible for us to do?

Ironically, when I chose this sermon title, I was not thinking about 9/11 at all. No, I was thinking about this sermon as the first in a series I am preaching this fall which I think of as 'UCC 101.' I envision a rediscovery of our UCC roots for those of us who have been a part of the denomination for quite awhile. I also see it as a teaching moment for those new to the United Church of Christ and to this church, United Congregational Church of Westerly (in Pawcatuck). I am still hoping this is what we will do in the coming weeks but, once again, I am absolutely blown away by the surprising ways in which God takes my plans – any of our plans – and molds them into something entirely different and entirely more wonderful than anything we could come up with on our own.

For example, in my original plan for this message about this question of "Who Are We Anyway," I was going to use this text from Matthew to explain its pivotal position in the history of the United Church of Christ. This beloved text from Matthew was the text John Winthrop preached to the first group of Puritan settlers as they were getting ready to board the *Arabella*, the tiny ship that would take them from England to their new home in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their expressed intent from the beginning was to establish a new "city on a hill" based on this particular text from Matthew's Gospel. When Jesus said the words "you are the light of the world" in his sermon on the mount, the Puritans of England knew he was speaking directly to them. And they fully intended to be the embodiment of these words of Jesus as they traveled across the seas to a new land where it would be possible for them to be just that – a light of the world, a beacon on a hill, for all to see just what was possible when life was built on faith in God. They made their dreams into reality, as we all know, and now, almost 400 years later, we are still suffering the consequences

of their success. These Puritans – their name tells you all you need to know about the way they practiced their faith – “pure-i-tans” -- are responsible for beginning what became the decimation of the Native Americans who greeted them when they set foot on shore. They also gifted us in the USA with the “Protestant Work Ethic.” You know what that is, right? Work til you drop trusting that God’s approval of you will be revealed in your success. Conversely, if you are struggling and unsuccessful, it can only be because you have done something wrong. Sigh. The Puritans also believed women should be seen and not heard as they devoted their lives to raise huge families where it was seen as God’s grace if even half of them lived to adulthood. I could go on, but you get my point. The Puritans, and their religious cousins the Pilgrims who settled just down the road in Plymouth, are in fact our religious relatives revealed when we examine the roots of the United Church of Christ. Like any of us, they did some amazing things and some not so great things. But, they’re still us.

They are not now nor were they ever the sum total of what has become the United Church of Christ. Yes, they showed us that seemingly impossible things can be accomplished when faith in God points the way forward. They showed us that good planning and well thought out government is necessary for a country to be born and to thrive. They even taught us that the courage of one’s convictions – of one’s faith in God as a driving force in life – really can accomplish seemingly impossible things. Indeed, they are the proof that with God all things are possible.

Who are we anyway? We are the people of God called together in this place in Pawcatuck, CT at this particular moment in the history of the world. We are the living embodiment of God’s beloved community in this community. We are blessed with the courage of our convictions and the power of God’s grace leading us forward. Will we make mistakes? Yes. Look at the Puritans for heavens sake. But can we do amazing things together if we keep our eyes on God’s dream for us to be that city of light on a hill, that beacon of hope for all to see and be drawn to? Yes, absolutely! May we be inspired this day once more to become the people God always intended us to be from before time began, people who trust with all their hearts and minds and strength that God loves us beyond all reason. We can believe without doubt that with God, all things are possible. Even for us. Amen.

