

A Day for Remembering: 9-11
Practical Lessons about Citizenship
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This is a weekend that is filled full to overflowing with the significance and symbolism of remembering, with 9-11 on Friday, honor flights and tea parties on Saturday, and today, which is the Sunday when we honor the significance of the Holy Cross for Jesus, the early disciples, the life of the church, and the salvation of the world. First, with regard to 9-11, this is the eighth year of remembering those unforgettable events on a Tuesday morning in lower Manhattan, Somerset, Pennsylvania, and Arlington, Virginia, when television seared into our minds images of the unimaginable, civilian airliners crashing into defenseless sky scrapers, proclaiming the warring madness that still infects our world. Most of the polished rhetoric has already been shared. Ground Zero is well on its way to a permanent replacement. Two wars have been and are being prosecuted. Americans know more than we ever wanted to know about Afghanistan and Iraq. The world continues to learn difficult and costly lessons about the long term complexities of nation building, radical Islam, clashes in cultures, a war of worlds: high tech versus low tech, remote controlled drones versus improvised explosive devices, America's sons and daughters with nothing to gain versus suicide bombers with seemingly nothing to lose.

If I were choosing a Lesson to match the challenge, I would return to the Second Lesson from July 19, when we were reading through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and landed upon a classic text lifting up the Cross of Christ as the key to finding our way through the infinite causes for division among us to the peace and reconciliation God desires to give. The text was Ephesians 2:11-22. Markus Barth wrote an entire book, *The Broken Wall*, discussing the significance of these dozen verses – verses that are rich in descriptive significance of the division sin inspires, and richer still in describing the solution God has offered in Christ. Paul begins by recounting how we are separated from one another physically, politically, religiously, spiritually, existentially and theologically (verses 11-12); *“but now in Christ Jesus we who are far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace. In his flesh he has made many into one, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility, that he might create in his body a new community of God's people, reconciling those who were divided into one body through the cross.”* The passage continues with a powerful description of the community we share in Christ.

Made one in Christ: this was, in sociological fact, a miracle that happened right before Paul's eyes and through his ministry – persons divided along physical lines by color, along religious lines by circumcision, along tribal lines by lineage, along political, religious, and cultural lines allowed their enmity to take a back seat, to be washed clean by the blood of Jesus, so that they might be made one in the Body of Christ. It didn't happen magically. It was a miracle, to be sure, but it didn't happen against their will and

without their commitment. It didn't happen without God's people opening their hearts to the love of God, and allowing God's reign to embrace their lives, inspiring the dedication of heart, mind, soul, and strength to taking up the Cross and following Christ. "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.*" (Mark 8:35) This is today's Gospel, chosen to commemorate Holy Cross Sunday in the life of the church. It talks about the Cross; but it is much more than mere talk.

Many of you may have read in the September edition of *The Zion Herald* about the long day that began for Larry Moore (and Susan Heyard) with a 5:30 a.m. flight out of the Akron Canton Airport bound for Washington, D.C. yesterday, Saturday, September 12. These *Honor Flights* are paid for by a grant from the Timken Foundation, given to honor veterans by choosing what has become a solemn day in our nation's recent history, and scheduling tours of our war memorials in D.C. Yesterday there was a special ceremony paying tribute to Larry Moore, along with four other veterans over ninety years of age, for the service they rendered to our country during World War II. The narrative of wars fought in the 20th century – beginning with the lingering effects of the Spanish-American war that preceded the turn of the century, extending to skirmishes in the skies over Bosnia that marked the transition to yet another century, with two great wars, two major conflicts, and two smaller, but costly, excursions to Iraq along the way – have made it clear that keeping the world safe for democracy has not come without a cost.

There is a price to be paid for the commitment to change the world for good. Larry's service makes it personal, but he doesn't stand alone among Zion's many families that have borne the cost of America's wars around the world. Jesus didn't have warfare in mind when he warned his followers that *those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it*; but what he was proposing was no less rigorous, and the results that came with the kingdom he proclaimed did indeed change the world for good. Many of Jesus' followers – way back then and through the centuries since – lost their lives through persecution and death. The record is clear: they died for their faith and they lived through their faith. Their faith in Jesus' cause and dedication to the way of the Cross cut a new course through the world, leading from Jerusalem, to Rome, across Western Europe, and ultimately to us.

We had some other members who were in Washington yesterday, practicing lessons in citizenship for which Larry and so many others offered the sacrifice of their service. Brian and Suzanne Walters were among the tens of thousands from Ohio, and millions from around the country who were in Washington for a Tea Party yesterday. Their journey began with a bus ride beginning at midnight Friday and getting in well after midnight last night. People gathered, speeches were given, voices were heard, a witness was offered, all in an attempt to change the world for good. Again, such desires do not come without a cost, without the need for disciplined commitment and sacrifice, along with the enjoyment of mutual support that comes with bonds of friendship and the camaraderie of fellowship. Through many and various ways, Jesus' call to create a new

community gathered around the Cross, disciplined by the Cross, dedicated to the Cross, defined by the Cross has made its significance known and its impact felt. It didn't occur overnight; and, as it turned out, the transformative effect of Jesus' message became a movement, whose presence has been felt and known through the communities it created.

When we think of Jesus' message and ministry among us, we often focus on the offer of salvation, and certainly Jesus proclaimed God's offer for the salvation of our souls. After all, *what will it profit us to gain the whole world and forfeit our souls*, as King James puts it. But scholars like Gerhard Lofink, in his book entitled *Jesus and Community*, have long reminded us that Jesus presumed the community of God's people as the context of his ministry. Jesus spoke from that community, and he spoke to that community. Jesus called the community of God's people to become what God created us to be. So, it wasn't just, nor even primarily, an offer of heavenly salvation for individual souls that formed the focus of his message. Lofink reminds us that Jesus sought not only, nor even primarily, to foster an inner attitude fixed on one's own salvation; rather, he sought to proclaim the good news of what had arrived with the new social order called the kingdom of God. In short, the life of God's people creates a contrast community to what our world offers by offering an alternative grounded in God's grace and guided by the love we see embodied on the Cross. The point is this: the gospel does not call us to turn inward with a focus on our own salvation, but to engage the world and transform it with the witness we offer through the community God has called us to be.

That's what we are doing today with Rally Day. Through this annual ritual and tradition, we are calling our church community together to focus on the year ahead – the programs we've organized, the ministries we've created, the challenges we face, the dedication we will muster to lift up our witness to the love of God alive among us, and to testify to its power to transform us as we share God's love with our neighbors near and far. Some of these neighbors are far way, halfway around the globe, and will receive our health kits and school kits through Lutheran World Relief. Others of these neighbors are right here in the North Canton, and will receive food and clothing, along with hugs and handshakes, through Zion's Food Pantry & Clothing Closet.

Through Rally Day, we invite our children to learn about God's love in many ways. They will learn about God's love through the Sunday School curriculum we have laid out for the year; but let's face it, they will learn about God's love mostly by looking to us for a sense of the vision that our faith inspires and for the kind of commitment our being faithful disciples requires. They will look to us and this community to see dedication to the kingdom of God displayed. They will look to us to get an up-close and personal feel for the cost of discipleship. They will look to us to learn about the joy that comes when hearts are warmed with the love God gives, when eyes are opened to see with the vision God's love inspires, when lives are filled with the desire that commits us to live by serving, to make a difference, to change the world for good ... in Jesus' name. Amen