

Column

Reaching into my mailbox, I pulled out a key indicating I had a package in a separate receptacle. Upon opening it, I discovered a large brown box almost too big for the space. Written on it were the words: “Fragile, handle with care.”

The package was a complete surprise. It was filled with lovely items from friends on the West Coast. After carefully removing and unwrapping them, my eyes again fell on the words on the box: “Fragile, handle with care.”

As the 22nd anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States approaches, it is worth pondering these words on a deeper level. They could well be stamped on life itself. After all, life is fleeting and uncertain as James in his New Testament epistle tells us when he writes: “For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (4:14).

Such fleeting of life was the experience of many going to their job in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center that fateful morning. This morning was like every other. There were children to get ready and send off either to sitters or schools. There were business proposals to be drafted and presented in a few hours, travel details to be worked out for next week and the week after, plans for lunch and dinner.

High above the bustle of those arriving for work, people of all sorts, workers as well as tourists, sipped coffee and chatted in the Windows on the World restaurant located on the 107th floor of the North Tower. Out the plate glass windows to the east they could see the bridges of Brooklyn, to the south the Statue of Liberty. Meanwhile, in the kitchens around 450 Windows employees, drawn from more than two dozen countries, hurried to supply the needs of those in the dining room. No doubt, they laughed and joked as they went about their work.

In short, it was a morning like every other. Then in a twinkling of an eye, their world changed as the first plane struck below leaving those on the top floors stranded and to perish.

I was never in the Windows on the World restaurant; however, I feel I have a connection with those employees. Around two weeks after 9/11, I was in the city and wandered into the Cathedral of St. John the Divine unaware that a great service remembering those who had perished, in particular the employees, was in progress. Upon entering, I was handed a candle. It was a poignant moment, and there was no way I could leave. It was one thing to watch on television people who had lost spouses, friends and colleagues; quite another to be standing alongside them as tears streamed down their faces. I shall carry that memory with me to the grave.

Twenty-two years have passed, yet 9/11 still has lessons to teach us, not the least being: Life is gift and needs to be received as such. People are to be loved and valued; things used and given a secondary status. Only what is done for Christ will last. Life is fragile, expanding on the words on my post office package.

Geronissa Gavrilla of Leros (1887-1992), Greek Orthodox nun, known for her care of the poor and sick, puts these thoughts together when she writes: “Whoever lives in the past is as dead. Whoever lives in the future in his imagination is naïve, because the future belongs only to God. The joy of Christ is found only in the present, the Eternal present of God.” So may we live, work and play.

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the the 13th Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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