

R-words for September 11

Colleagues,

“Aut disce aut discede.” So said the bumper sticker [yes indeed, in Latin!] that I saw just the other day on our street here in south St. Louis. It’s grim: Either discern or de cease. In nickel words: Either learn or die. There’s something Biblical about that epigram. Although the Biblical versions (sometimes) articulate the flip-side: Repent and live. Fifty-two weeks ago Thursday Theology #170 gathered such texts from the Bible as a Word from God for 9-11. [If interested, you can check it out on the Crossings website “September 13, 2001”] There’s been scant evidence, so it seems to me, that any such Biblical discerning/learning has occurred in the USA in these 52 weeks. If the adage is indeed Biblical, and thus true, the prognosis is grim. Even so, eleventh hour repentance [learn and then turn]—if only from a remnant—has promise that the whole people may yet live and not die. That’s also a Word from God.

The main text for today’s posting comes from Crossings colleague Fred Niedner, Theology prof at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Some of you may recognize its links to the ThTh posting of a year ago. It’s Fred’s homily just preached in the Valparaiso University chapel on September 10. You will be edified. I was. And be sure to read the Biblical texts Fred’s using to edify us.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

R-words for the Eve of September 11 Tuesday in the Week of Pentecost 16

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Luke 13:1-9

“Remembrance and Renewal” are our theme words this morning. There’s no mystery about what and whom we’re remembering, nor have we any trouble doing so. None of us will ever forget what we saw and heard, or what we were doing when we first learned what was happening on that stunningly beautiful Tuesday morning last year at this time. Indeed, one would have to be blind, deaf, a frequent abuser of mind-altering substances, and perhaps afflicted with dementia in order to forget. In one way or another, we’ve talked of little else since that day’s devastation.

Almost immediately that day we began to traffic in R-words, though not yet RE-membrance. Our leaders quickly RE-assured us that they’d help us RE-cover. Moreover, they had a strong RE-solve to go after those RE-sponsible, and when they found them we would have the satisfaction of RE-tribution, RE-prisal, and RE-taliation.

We filled up this chapel on that Tuesday morning a year ago, and again that night, and for several evenings thereafter. We were stunned, numb. Our minds could not fathom nor our hearts bear the weight of what our eyes saw on the television.

We didn’t have a name for what we sought when we came here to be together. It was surely complex, whatever it was. Perhaps RE-newal names it aptly. We longed for nothing more, perhaps, than to go back and start over, to rewind the tape of that week and hope that when we played it again, it would all be different.

I traffic in biblical words, and the New Testament has three words for RE-newal. One of them means to be born again. The other two describe a process of being restored to a prior condition, of no longer knowing what you've come to know through life experience, or of no longer being used for the same, unfortunate purpose as before.

Do you fill an old wineskin with new wine, or expect to pour clear, life-giving waters from a container that's held poison for the last year? That's the condition of our hearts and minds, it seems to me. We desperately need RE-newal.

But I'd like to add another R-word to the conversation today, one that hasn't been voiced about as much as the others in the past year, though some have dared to speak it. It's a word that appears in both the lessons we heard a bit earlier, though thanks to our English translation we could easily miss it in the Ezekiel lesson that's part of this week's lectionary.

In Luke's account of the conversation about gratuitous bloodshed and a tower that came crashing down, the word is unmistakable, however. Jesus asks the disciples if maybe they were thinking that the people who died in one of Pilate's atrocities deserved what they got, or likewise those who were crushed when the marvelous Tower of Siloam fell on them.

Well, yes, that is what they were thinking, matter of fact, just like we usually think that those who suffer or die must have done something that brought that on themselves—they drove drunk, perhaps, or had unprotected sex, or didn't pay attention to their diet, or SOMETHING! There must be some reason. And when we establish the reason, we'll RE-solve surely not do THAT, so we'll avoid the fate of those poor blokes who weren't careful as they should have been—or as we're going to be.

We are a meaning-making species. One way or another, we will

find a way to make meaning out of even the most inexplicable circumstances—including such things as September 11. We have to, because human beings cannot abide chaos.

But so much of our meaning-making apparatus has as its true purpose the taking of control over our circumstances and establishing our own innocence, justification, and rightness. Whatever happened, it wasn't my fault. I'm clean.

Jesus has an R-word for us as we think along these lines. "RE-pent," he says. Never mind whose fault things were. Truth be told, our lives are so tangled and enmeshed, not only in our families but on this tiny globe of a world as well, that it's impossible to determine exactly who's to blame for what.

Besides, all the goodness and righteousness you can muster will never make you exempt from falling towers or killers on the loose.

So don't go any further into the darkness of seeking your own control. Instead, Jesus says, RE-pent. Stop. Look where you are. Turn around. Come home.

Or at least just stop, and turn around to face the one who comes to seek you in the dust and rubble and darkness— Jesus Christ, who also fell victim to Pilate's bloody games, and on whom the vaunted towers of Roman justice and Israel's torah came crashing down in a heap of stones and nails that killed him.

He comes into our darkness as well, to die with us beneath the horror of what we've all together made of this world. He died with and for all who perished in New York, the Pentagon, and in a Pennsylvania field, including those we blame for it all. RE-nawal will only come through dying with him instead of insisting on choosing our own poison, our own righteousness.

The same Spirit that raised him from the dead will fill us, too, in the new year of life we're given today, tomorrow, and each day as we RE-member our baptism, so that we are RE-born, used for a new purpose, cleansed of our sorry, old knowledge and experience and planted again where we can bearsweet fruit.

We stand in remembrance today. We await renewal. We stop, we turn around in the rubble, and we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus."

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