

Eighteen years ago I had just started my first week of seminary when in a hallway at Saint Thomas near the cafeteria I saw some of the footage that was coming out of New York City of the terrorist attacks that had occurred. And as the day unfolded, it became clear that this was an incredible act of evil that had taken the lives of thousands.

But from the evil of that day, what we've also learned in the years that have followed is that there has also been incredible good that has taken place in the stories of people who turned out to help, and of course the heroic efforts of the police officers and fire fighters who were the first in to help the victims.

The day also showed us a truth about humanity, namely that inside all of us is this incredible capacity to love and be an agent for good in the world, and that each one of us has the power to unite rather than to divide, and to build one another up by dispelling fear and darkness with hope and mercy.

A thousand miles to the north of New York City you'll find Newfoundland and Labrador, which has only been a part of Canada since 1949. It is one of the poorest spots in Canada, with many of the descendants of the Scots and the Irish living simply in harsh conditions. And here you will also find the town of Gander.

September 11, 2001, began as a beautiful day there with the air warm and the skies clear. People had heard there was a plane crash at the World Trade Center in New York. But soon they would be brought right into the consequences of that disaster.

Less than an hour after the north tower was struck, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) orders all non military planes to land immediately; for the first time in history US Airspace is closed. There were 400 westbound planes over the Atlantic and of those 167 can't go back to Europe because they are too far across.

This is where Gander enters the picture. Gander for a time had the longest runway in the world; at the start of World War II an airport was built there as the takeoff point for our planes headed to the European theater, then later used for refueling but with the advent of the jumbo jet, only a few jets would fly into the airport every day. But on September 11, they, along with other small airports in Newfoundland, were asked to help all of those westbound jets land that were coming from Europe. And so what had expected to be 8 domestic flight landings that day turned into 38 planes that one by one filled the tarmac as through the hard work of air traffic controllers, hundreds of planes are somehow landed without any incident.

Planes begin landing, and no one is allowed off of the plane until customs and security are in place, as there is fear there may be more hijackers out there. Some of the passengers would be on the plane for over 24 hours.

Six thousand of those passengers on the planes end up in Gander, population 10,000. These are people who are exhausted and confused, hardly anyone knowing where they were.

But this is when the town springs into action.

It starts with school busses. All of the drivers were on a strike, but when word gets out that people need help, all of the drivers who were picketing put down the signs and go to the airport to give people rides to shelters.

Then people in town start arriving meeting passengers with home cooked meals. Beulah Cooper, who was a community organizer of the Canadian Legion hall, was asked to bring some sandwiches before she knew what was going on, and then everyone else in town starts preparing food as well. Many people would help night and day to feed people, some working through dinner until 9 p.m. only to get up early to make breakfast for people the next day by 7.

As the passengers can't remove checked bags from the planes, many of the travelers have just the shirts on their backs. So shops are opened without expectation of repayment; clothes are brought down to the passengers. People who need drugs but can't get a prescription are helped by pharmacists who work across language barriers to get people medicine. Donations pour in from across Newfoundland turning the ice rink into the largest walk in refrigerator in the world so 7000 people can be fed.

Strangers welcome the passengers into their homes; one passenger remembers a clerk saying do you want to come over and take a shower; another passenger saying once they were invited over by a person from the town, they were told here's the bathroom, here's fresh towels, and the door to the house is always open. The schools and churches are also opened as are many private homes for people to stay in. People open their homes for phone calls, clothing, anything you can think of.

But then there is the human element too as people help one another sensing hurt. Hannah and Dennis O'Rourke are sleeping in the Canadian Legion Hall, and Beulah Cooper notices they are staying there non stop. She invites them into her home, but they won't leave because they fear missing a phone call about their son Dennis who is an NYC firefighter. And so she sits with them, talks with them, and goes to church with them and does anything she can to help them find peace; they would later learn that their son died trying to rescue people at the World Trade Center. But Beulah and the O'Rourkes would be friends for the rest of their lives.

Captain Beverly Bass, who was the first ever woman to be a captain on a major airline and landed her plane in Gander, said she was shocked at the amount of food cooked and what people did. Mary Tibady who was a passenger when interviewed said she was in tears seeing such generosity. And one passenger who was 81 years old said after 9/11, she had lost all faith in humanity, but experiencing what she did in that small town restored her faith in humanity.

The passengers also wanted to show their love for the people. The townspeople refused any money. And so on a Delta flight, a hat was passed to set up a scholarship

fund at the town's high school where so many of them had stayed. That flight got \$15,000 in donations, that grew to about a million today and helped provide a college education for over 100 graduates.

Beyond this, there have been so many friendships forged as many of the passengers returned; two who even got married in the autumn of their lives after meeting there, a woman from Texas and an Englishman who was on the way to Texas as an oil company representative. When they returned and locals found out they were honeymooning there, wrote them a song.

To the people of Gander, whose story of those days after 9/11 is now a Broadway Musical called *Come From Away* (with many of the actors traveling there to get to know the residents), when you see their interviews, so many do not see what they did as anything unique, but simply a way of life and treating others that is ingrained in them. And indeed, I truly believe inside all of us is compassion and a hard-wiring if you will from our Creator to love one another as God has loved us. The problem is sometimes life can beat us up. Sometimes we can make decisions to distance ourselves from others. Or we can see the evil in the world and feel powerless. The father of the two brothers in the parable we heard though shows us the better way; symbolizing the love of God. A love that is always seeking us out wherever we are at, just like the love of the people of Gander did for those passengers.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the best known stories in the Bible. And there's always so much to unpack with it when you read it; the love of the father waiting on the hill, looking for his son; the wayward son who is selfish before realizing what a fool he was who can't even get a word out of his memorized lines to be treated as a servant before the father embraces him; and the angry older brother who is embittered and resentful, not even seeing his brother as his brother or understanding what a loving relationship with his father is about, rather just seeing his role as one of working and slaving away until his time comes to inherit his share. But the father seeks him out too, meeting him where he is at.

But what I also think of when I hear this parable is division. The division between the sons and their father for different reasons, and what love does to fix that. On 9/11, we saw division too; terrorists tried to divide us, but we were brought closer together. And yet unfortunately there was still some division as there always will be; some Muslims were hated and ostracized; some in parts of the world actually cheered the evil because of their hate for America. These kind of divisions will always be there. But if we work at it, the good can always come through. So, how can we make that way of Gander a way of life in our lives and our world? How can we emulate the loving father in the story? I'd invite you to start with yourself and keep expanding the circle as we are reminded of how we are all connected, all brothers and sisters as God's children.

Starting with ourselves, we have to ask ourselves how is our soul divided. We say we love God, but do we? Do we see the faith as an obligation to fulfill like the older brother? Is God at the same rank as our work, our youth sports schedules, our busyness? Are

we battling some kind of addiction in private to things we shouldn't look at on the computer, abuse of the body or drugs or alcohol? Are we struggling with something and feel we can't ask for help? Sometimes in life we try to put a bit of energy into image, making others feel like we are perfect and our lives our perfect. But God sees past that. And like the father in the story, He will seek us out to help make us whole again. So let God take your hand and bring you into the celebration that is yours in heaven by trusting Him, hiding nothing from Him.

Expanding a bit, how about our families? In most every family there is a little bit of dysfunction, or people who may not be our favorite people. There's nothing wrong with liking some more than others, but how do we treat our family? Do we take advantage of them? Are we expectant like the younger son at first, being selfish or just thinking our parents or spouse will always do what we want them to do? Do we help out one another? Parents, as your kids age, do you take a page from the father who does not rush after the younger son or try to control him, but lets him go so he can learn and grow as a human being, or do you try to control their lives or live out your own dreams through them? Are there people in your family whom you just can't forgive, living or deceased? Do you reach out to those who maybe aren't mobile or in a nursing home? Do you open the blinds on family secrets that have caused division and work towards healing? Do we strive for forgiveness and reconciliation?

Going a bit further, how about our parishes and our Church? Saint Huberts for me was a great experience as has been Saint Joseph's where I'm currently a pastor. But in parishes, I've also seen cliques on staff. I've experienced a lot of support, but even hate from some parishioners; I've heard parishioners gossip about one another and staff and me or the pastor when I was an associate; and many a priest sometimes has folks come from another parish who start talking about what is wrong with their parish or their priest there. Again, for the most part, people love their parish and one another. But at the same time, people can sometimes attack one another or a bishop or pope for not meeting their definition of orthodoxy or progressiveness or for not getting "their way" in a parish forgetting they are part of a family of thousands and a universal Church of over a billion. So we need to think about what we say about one another especially through gossip, and what we say on social media, and ask ourselves always how can I build up rather than tear down.

A little further still, how about our country and world? Is our mission statement the salvation of souls? Do we judge people with that purpose in mind, or simply see Republican or Democrat, or what they do for a living, or where they live or their income bracket or the color of their skin? Do we respond to one another always with love, seeing them in the image and likeness of God first and foremost?

And lastly, do we follow in all of this the example of the loving father, who did two things well. For one, he embraced the younger son with compassion, looking for him to return from the emptiness he went into. He did exactly what those people did meeting the stranded people with love and compassion. People need that as there is so much hurt in the world, some of it like on 9/11 through no fault of anyone who was impacted by the

terrorists, but other times people like the older brother get lost and don't even know it. Who knows what has made him so angry and bitter. But the father goes out to get him too. People in our world are lost due to a lack of catechesis; so many are brought up to think what matters isn't sainthood so much as getting into a good school and a scholarship and winning sports trophies and then getting a good job and bringing children in the world to do the same. But, funny, I've yet to see a U-Haul in a funeral procession. So many also just get tied up in addictions with all the bad things available online, or running with the wrong crowd, or coping with stress in bad ways. And others are taught relativism, meaning anything goes so long as you don't hurt anybody not knowing that there's a lot that is legal that hurts the soul. This is where we can't stay hidden, but need to get out and evangelize and invite people to Mass, talk to them about what the Church teaches and why, and be willing to be hated even for the sake of the Gospel. The father explains to the older son what is going on; he doesn't budge, yet, but hopefully the mustard seeds are planted and he changes and comes to see his father's wisdom. Like him, we need to seek out the lost too no matter how they ended up that way.

In life, it can be so easy to give up at times. To give up on life when things seem difficult. To give up when it seems we can't overcome something. To give up on getting people to come back to Mass or to understand the faith. To get frustrated with so many bad things that happen. But we must never forget the incredible power of love and mercy to transform. The love of God transforms us into saints when we respond to it, and when we look to the Cross we are reminded that God saw not the evil of Good Friday that crucified Jesus, but the potential in man saying forgive them, they know not what they do. And even here at Saint Hubert's, when as a parish there were challenges, people came together to support one another, just as they have done for so many years. When we look to the Cross, the paradox is while we see evil's impact, we also see our potential - to love like Jesus, so saw that potential in us. Following the 1956 fire that destroyed a wing of St. Gregory Seminary in Cincinnati, a faculty member found in the rubble the corpus from a crucifix with hands and arms burned away. The body was later affixed to a new cross and mounted in the seminary cafeteria with the legend beneath: "You are my hands and my arms." May we respond to that sacrifice which we celebrate on our altar by truly showing God the best of what we can be. To be his hands and arms in the world. For the need is so great in our world with so many older and younger brothers out there; so many who are lost; so many who hurt. So let us seek those people out and help bring them into the celebration that will await them in the kingdom of God, by truly loving without exception, like the people of Gander on 9/11, and like our Lord loves us all.