

Twenty years ago this weekend, like millions of others, I watched on TV as the news of the terrorist attacks unfolded on 9/11. I think most of us that day felt mixed emotions of shock and anger and disbelief at what was happening.

At first, it was hard to get past the power of evil. I remember one early image of a face in the smoke that appeared to be that of the devil; I remember some terrorists around the world rejoicing. But what I also remember from that day is the power of human compassion. The power of humanity to show the inherent goodness that is in our souls. For what we saw that day was, on the one hand, the evil acts of hijackers. But we also saw the selfless acts of love from so many others to bring hope in the midst of darkness.

On 9/11 itself, 2,606 died in the Twin Towers. However, the number would have been even higher were it not for people helping one another to not panic and to get out.

Sadly, Wells Romney Crowther is among those who died that day. He was in the lobby as the South Tower collapsed, literally just feet away from

freedom. He wasn't planning on going out the front door though. Rather he died next to several other firefighters, as he was planning on going with them back up the stairwells to help get more people out of the rubble.

Wells was the son of a firefighter. He grew up in the suburbs, about 25 miles north of Manhattan. His mom, Allison, remembers that he loved a fire engine truck that he could ride in as a three year old, and on Saturdays he'd spend them with his dad at the firehouse, often helping clean the fire engines, cleaning parts the other firefighters couldn't get to because of his small size. By the time he was a teenager he was a junior firefighter.

According to his loved ones, he was the type of person who was always thinking of others. He'd lift people up and give them confidence, such as when he passed the puck to a teammate so he could get his first goal on his varsity team, and made sure to get the puck for him to keep. Or when he was at his sister's lacrosse game at Boston College; he played lacrosse too, and his team had just lost but he and some friend stayed for her game, and she remembers him shouting from the stands "that's my sister" with incredible joy because she had scored 3 goals in her game. Wells rejoiced in the success of others, and wasn't one to be in the limelight himself.

Maybe that's part of the reason it took time for his heroics on 9/11 to become known.

Though he still thought of being a firefighter, after college he was hired to work as an analyst and then became an equities trader. Every day he'd report to work on the 104th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

He was there on the morning of 9/11 when a United Airlines plane flew into the building, below where he was.

It was then that he sprang into action.

With others he was attempting to get out. However when it was clear the damage was so extensive by the time they got lower, people began to panic. All they could see was smoke and debris. Elevators obviously couldn't function where the plane hit; and attempts to find stair wells only resulted in finding more flames and smoke.

However, at that moment, Wells put on a red bandana.

He carried it with him since he was a little boy. One time when his dad was dressing up in a suit, he saw his dad had a blue handkerchief. He asked his dad, Jeff, if he could have one too. So his dad gave him a red one. It took, and he carried it with him wherever he went. In this case, knowing he needed it to protect him from the smoke, he put it around his face.

But this wasn't so he could get out. It was so he could help others get out.

People who saw him that day told stories of this young man wearing a red bandana emerging out of the rubble and smoke. On the 78th floor, near where the plane hit, there was a concentration of people. Said one survivor who remembered the plane coming towards him, all he could do was dive under a desk and pray "Lord, I can't do this, can you take over." The lights were out and debris was everywhere; elevators were crumpled. From the time the plane hit, the people in the South Tower had 56 minutes before it would collapse.

Initially he was declared dead and no one knew what he did that day; but in the spring of 2002 the New York Times did a story on those who helped others, and survivors spoke of a man in a red bandana who worked for an insurance company. His mom got in touch and sent pictures of her son to one of the survivors profiled, and she confirmed that was in fact him.

What Wells did that day was to get to that 78th floor, the sky lobby where you'd go from one set of elevators to another that go higher up, and this was where there was incredible damage. The point at which the plane hit, no one got through this area in the North Tower, but in the South, 18 made it out of the crash zone, due largely to the help of Wells.

Due to an architectural fluke, with one stairwell going around an elevator shaft, there was one of three stairwells that were still accessible. Wells was the one to find the door. And so grabbing a fire extinguisher, he tried to clear a path. He went up to a group of people who were paralyzed with fear, worried if they moved the building would collapse, and told them to follow him. He lifted up a woman who was injured and carried her down some stairs. And when he led the group down the stairs when they got to a lower floor, he told them he was going back up according to one of the survivors.

And so back up he went. Kelly, one of the survivors who saw him on the second trip up, said he pointed her and others to the door where they could get out. And so not thinking of himself at all but others that morning, he went from floor 104 down to 78 down to 61, and then back up. He went up and down 3 times before he ended up in the lobby.

It was there he was talking to the battalion chief and other firefighters, about what tools were needed to extract people and bring them down, where Wells offered his help to go back up with the firefighters. Sadly, in just 8 1/2 seconds, the tower collapsed on top of them.

It's estimated that he saved 10 of the 18 people who were the ones to emerge from the impact zone that morning. Today, he lives on not only in God's kingdom, but through people who want to share his story to inspire others. His mom founded the Red Bandana Project, which is a school curriculum for schools and youth groups that teaches forgiveness and leadership, and his dad was involved in a children's book that has spread his story. A documentary was made that features the people who knew him, this man who suffered for others so that they might live.

But what's also fascinating is what when you watch the documentary, or read about the stories of 9/11, there's the stories of the valor on the day itself, and also stories of people like Harry Wanamaker, a first responder who kept going back to Ground Zero for 9 months after 9/11. He'd speak to Wells' parents often, telling them he was going to find their son and he gave them hope. Eventually that suffering on his part claimed his life too, as he developed cancer from the toxic fumes and died in 2010. He did help however find Wells' remains so that the family could have peace.

Suffering, as we know all too well, is a part of our lives. We do not seek it out. But there is no getting around it. And while we do all we can to alleviate certain types of suffering, there is the other kind of suffering that we need to take on if we truly want to help others.

It's what at the heart of our readings this week.

From Isaiah, our first reading, taken from the second part of the book known as "Deutero Isaiah" written as the people are returning from Babylon, we hear of God's power and majesty. But we also hear of a special servant throughout this section, someone who will come to do the work of the Lord.

But woven throughout this section include many verses we hear on Palm Sunday or Good Friday or during Stations of the Cross in Lent. For instance, in Isaiah 50:6 we read from today's reading: "I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who tore out my beard; my face I did not hide from insults and spitting." Or Isaiah 53, where we read "He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, knowing pain, like one from whom you turn your face, spurned, and we held him in no esteem. Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, but he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed."

The servant is not someone who is going to come with earthly armies, which is why the same people who welcomed Jesus with palms dropped them and left so quickly. Rather He is a servant who brings justice and peace, but not through violence. But rather by taking upon Himself the punishment due the world. Jesus has to remind His apostles of this on more than one occasion; that He will be rejected by the chief priests and scribes and elders.

When we think about this, we again remember how deeply God loves the world. God allows evil to happen such as 9/11, such as Covid, such as the Passion. But this servant enters into it freely. And that's why it's worth thinking about time and time again. When we look to the pain and hurt in the world, God is there with us. When we look at our own lives, and try to gloss over the things that maybe we are ashamed of or want to pretend that they are not there, God is there. When people betray us, God is there. There truly is no limit to the depth of God's love for us. But when we gaze upon that little host the priest holds up, or upon the crucifix, we see God's radical love with that reminder that He suffers as we suffer, and does so freely because He loves us, and through that suffering and sacrificial love, He shows us God's definitive answer to evil and pain.

However, He also invites us to follow Him. In our second reading, we are told faith, if it does not have works, is dead. And in the Gospel, Jesus says: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Hard words, because who likes suffering? Now again, we don't seek out suffering just to suffer. But so often in life, we can be tempted to take the easy way out. To cheat at our schoolwork. To lie to cover something up. To not say what needs to be said because it may lead

to being uncomfortable or a fractured relationship. To do half a job, or not enough for our loved ones. But inside the Christian like Wells, the man in the red bandana on 9/11, is the ability to bring hope and light into this world. Through our suffering, we can be transformed for the better, and we do that for others. I think of my parents, who worked so hard at their jobs, but helped out their own parents, helped me with homework, worked hard around the house, and didn't take elaborate vacations or spend excessively for the benefit of the family. Think of the hijackers on 9/11; a planned act of evil. They succeeded in bringing down the towers. But they did not succeed in crushing the American Spirit, or the spirit of good. Because far greater than the 19 Al-Qaeda hijackers were the people like Wells. Or Harry Wanamaker. Or the firefighters going into the rubble. Or the ordinary people who did all they could to help one another. From the evil of that day, love emerged. And for ourselves, as we look at our daily lives, we daily need to ask ourselves too, will I suffer out of love for my family, for the greater world, for my Church? From staying up late to help with a science fair project, shoveling out your elderly neighbors sidewalk, saying "no" as a parent when you know your teenager won't understand, or being the lone voice to speak up amongst others on a matter of faith and morals knowing it may lead to arguing, all of these things entail suffering. But when we do

these things, we take up our cross and put our faith into action. When we do these things, even though people might not see it at the time, we deepen their faith.

My brother in law Dan yesterday shared a story of a dog on 9/11 I hadn't heard about before. It was the story of Michael Hingson, and how he made it out alive. It was due to his dog.

On the morning of September 11th, Michael Hingson was at his desk on the 78th floor of the North Tower. He had come into the office early for a meeting. Michael, who has been blind since birth, worked as a computer salesman and his 3-year old Labrador Retriever "Roselle" was his guide dog. Roselle was asleep at his feet when American Airlines flight 11 struck the building 15 floors above them. She was awakened by the explosion and immediately went to work. With a tight grip on the dog's harness, Roselle navigated Michael to stairwell B. Through the heavy smoke and mass confusion, the dog took point, leading her owner and 30 others down some 1,463 steps to the ground level. "While everyone ran in panic, Roselle remained totally focused on her job...debris fell around us, and even hit us, Roselle stayed calm." Around the 30th floor, the brave firefighters who were

heading the opposite direction started passing Michael. They each stopped to offer him assistance, but he declined. Michael gave them the opportunity to pet Roselle, providing many of those heroes with what would be their last experience of unconditional love. The harrowing descent took just over an hour. Once clear, the guide dog led Michael to a nearby subway station entrance where she even helped a woman who had been blinded by falling debris. The crumbling tower fell just moments later. Michael and Roselle both survived that day.

In 2002, Roselle, along with another guide dog from that morning and a search & rescue dog who assisted at ground zero, were all awarded the United Kingdom's Dickin Medal for their heroic service. The Medal is often referred to as the animal equivalent of the Victoria Cross and has been awarded only 73 times since 1943. The pair went on to travel all around the world, speaking to audiences about trust, teamwork, guide dogs and blindness. She passed away in 2011 from an auto-immune disorder at the age of 13.

Said her human companion Michael: "When I remember how she behaved on that morning in 2001, I think the most powerful thing she taught me was

that working together is the most powerful thing we can do". How true that is.

It's no secret that I'm a dog lover, and what I love with that story is that all of us in a sense can be spiritually blind. Life is hard, and it can be easy to get lost through our own decisions or how life just beats us down. Anyone who is lucky enough to have a dog in their life knows the unconditional love they give you; I truly believe I get a glimpse of God when I'd look into the eyes of Kirby or Emmett. But in life, we all need guides like Roselle, like the man in the red bandana, who help us to find the way to Kingdom of Heaven, especially when that path can be hard to see at times. So let us seek these people out when we are hurting, knowing that God always seeks us out, and never forget that while the power of evil is strong, far greater is the power of hope and love, which we can embrace by like our Lord, being a suffering servant for one another.