

On September 11, 2001, I had just started my seminary journey. Like everyone that day, by late morning, I was watching what was going on in New York, first seeing it on a TV in one of the buildings at Saint Thomas in between classes, and then watching more coverage back in my dorm room.

Now 22 years later, we remember the horror and evil of what occurred. But what we also remember is this incredible unity that followed from people of all walks of life coming together as a community in one of the darkest days in the history of our nation.

Susan Kimmel Wright, who is a writer having penned a number of mystery novels and short stories, writes how on the morning of 9/11, she called her mom who still lived in the house where Susan had grown up in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Susan was planning a visit, but had been overwhelmed with work, and planned to wait until Thursday of that week.

She chatted a while with her mom, then headed to the shower and her mom went to start some laundry. She was still in the shower when her phone rang.

“Oh, Susan, the world is coming to an end.” Her editor from the local weekly started reeling off facts faster than her brain could absorb them. She snatched at fragments, trying to make sense of them: two planes had hit the World Trade Center, one hit the Pentagon, another came down in Somerset County.

Her heart jolted. “Where in Somerset County”?

She didn’t know.

“My mom lives in Somerset County,” Susan told her editor.

“Wait a minute.” She quickly checked. “Does your mom live anywhere near Indian Lake?”

The world stopped.

“About five miles away” she said. She later learned that the plane had come down a lot closer than that.

Susan’s editor had wanted her to start making phone calls for an article about the response of their local school districts to the terrorist attack. But at that point, all she could think of was her mom. She dialed her number with fumbling fingers and got a recording that the call could not be completed as dialed. Susan’s mind was racing, wondering if the plane crash disintegrated the phone line, or perhaps destroyed the house with her in it.

For the next few hours, she dialed and re-dialed, praying until she finally got her mom.

It turned out that the plane crashed barely a mile and a half from her house. It left a huge crater, black not from coal dust, but from incineration. Her cousin called her from work, to ask if his house was still there. His was the last call to get through before all lines in and out of the county were jammed.

For the next several hours, she told her, vehicles streamed past the house on their backcountry road - rescue vehicles, news units and military.

Growing up, Susan felt safe in their little town where everybody knew everybody - and most were related to one another. Just a few houses, a small church, woods and fields. Susan often told her kids, "If anything happens, we'll head for grandma's house. We'll be safe there."

But now, the world and its problem had gotten there ahead of Susan.

Once reassured her mom was safe, Susan went back to work for the newspaper, making her calls and writing her article. A while later, the phone rang. Her three kids were in the high school office and her daughter was crying. The principal had initially refused to let them use the phone, not realizing how very close the crash had been, which contributed to her kids' growing panic.

"Is grandma all right" she asked.

Susan was thankful she'd gotten through to her mom before her kids called, and was able to reassure them. She resisted their request to come straight home, said she'd see them soon, and then asked to speak to the principal. She still needed quotes for her article.

The next two days, Susan reflected, were a national nightmare. The skies were empty, apart from military aircraft. The enormity of what had happened, the massive hole that had been ripped through everyone's hearts, was impossible to process.

But suddenly, Susan writes, we weren't so conscious of our piegholes. We weren't so much a certain race, religion, or ethnicity. Not so much urban, rural, or suburbanite. Not wealthy or homeless, liberal or conservative. We were Americans. Many people, Susan suspects, woke up for the first time to the realization of how much they loved this country. They loved one another. They crowded into prayer services, They drew together, mourned together, and together pulled the torn pieces of our collective heart back over that gaping hole.

But how had this atrocity changed her hometown? It had always been a good place, with good neighbors who looked out for each other. Susan wondered if their little town, where everyone knew everyone, could ever survive this. Nonstop international news coverage posted updates from New York, Washington, D.C, and Shanksville. She wondered if her father or grandparents - all in their graves for years at that point - ever have imagined something like this.

The third day, Susan went to see her mom. When she got off the turnpike in Somerset, and turned toward home, even the road seemed weirdly empty, like the skies. The Armory parking lot was full of military vehicles though. It had been turned into a temporary morgue.

All along Route 281, and the pull-around in front of Friedens Elementary, flags flew. Handmade signs said "God Bless America." Handwritten messages of sympathy for family members cropped up all along the way.

In this surreal new world, Susan felt a rush of warmth and pride. She knew - although everything had changed in an instant - they were still the same in Shanksville.

A strange car sat in her mother's driveway. Her sister-in-law Wendy, in New York City on business, had been staying in a hotel near the World Trade Center. She'd been scheduled to leave September 11th. With all planes grounded, and car rental computers down, she'd finally convinced a rental agency employee to hand-write a contract for her, so she could get home. She'd taken an overnight break at Susan's mom's on her way back to Dayton, Ohio.

Wendy offered to ride with Susan to a news briefing at the site and help gather information. Where she used to catch the school bus as a child there was now a security checkpoint. Susan shared her credentials and was passed through.

They followed the school bus route for another mile to a field being used as a staging area. Behind the sunflowers blooming along the edge of the road, satellite trucks and Red Cross tents sprouted like some kind of alien crop.

Sitting behind reporters, a stone's throw from a farmhouse where Susan used to babysit, and another where they'd had 4-H meetings, she felt another disconnect. Until she heard the Somerset County Coroner, Wallace Miller, speaking. Until she heard emergency workers thanking the neighbors for not only accepting the disruption but also offering food and coffee and bathrooms and even leaving their house keys when they went to work. Everything shrank back to human scale again, and Susan was home.

Whatever was taken from us as a nation, she writes, and specifically from families and friends who lost loved ones - they hadn't taken our souls. Nothing she says has given her greater pride in the years since 9/11 than hearing the bereaved family members say they feel a bond with the people of Somerset County. Her heart swelled when she read a Red Cross account that said: "When the buses carrying family members to and from the crash scene went by, adults and children lined the roads, shoulder to shoulder, hands over hearts, holding American flags, and totally silent."

She closes by saying they may have been a town where everybody knew everybody and most of them were related. But, when the world came to their door, and innocent people were suffering unspeakable loss, they were cared for with all the love of friends and family. That is the spirit of her small town she says, and the true spirit of America.

Ideally, this would not be something that just comes to the surface in a tragedy. While many of us remember the unity after 9/11, we are also very much aware of the divisions that have always been a part of human life too. Today there is certainly much division politically, but it is nothing new. Throughout human history there have been intense divisions over race, politics, religion, often leading to violence. We all know though Jesus shows us a better way. Paul reminds us in Romans that all of the commandments are summed up in “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So how can we strive to make this a way of life?

As a starting point, we try to see one another as God sees - as human beings in need of love. The people of Shanksville, Pennsylvania, did not see strangers so much as people in need; as such they opened their homes and did what they could to help. The same thing happened in New Foundland when so many commercial airliners were rerouted on 9/11 to land there and people were stranded for a week until planes were flying again. Inside the human heart is incredible empathy; something hard wired to help when we see a fellow human hurting. Sometimes it is easy to quickly judge a person; and sometimes we have to do that. However, hopefully we also remember that inside all is such a capacity for good that can come to the surface, and we try to always remind ourselves even if a person may be at a point where they are making poor choices, that goodness is still there.

That’s the second step: trying to bring that goodness to the surface. In our Gospel for today, the Lord is clear that our first response when someone wrongs us is not to push them away, but to engage them to have a conversation. When Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II was arrested, the pope literally did just that, going to his jail cell and forgiving him and having a conversation. Jesus then says if that does not work bring others into the conversation. Throughout this though the default position is one of charitable engagement. Often our reaction can be to jump to social media or click send or to let others know how we were wronged by someone so they will assert that they are in fact an awful person. Jesus though says start alone with the person to get to know their motives and actions, to get to the truth. To go the extra mile and not give into premature judgment. It’s not easy when someone gossips about us, or maybe judges us for our politics or this or that, but it can lead to a better understanding of a person and true peace. Often we as humans think well they are in the wrong, they can come to me. But Christ’s way is different. When we as humans killed our Lord, He came to us to forgive, literally going through a locked door, and we should strive to do the same. And lest we think we have an out by treating someone like a tax collector if nothing else works, remember the author of the Gospel is a former tax collector named Matthew!

Lastly, I think it’s so important to make what happened in Shanksville after 9/11 a way of life. There is so much anger out there, everywhere. On social media. On the roads. In homes. People seem always on edge; and folks are hurting. They are worried about the future, the direction of our country; people have stress in the family and at home in their relationships and with their finances and are busy. Sometimes people seem to feel so

isolated. We have a challenge to live out the commandment of our Lord to love our neighbor, and we do this by daily asking ourselves who is in need? By praying with someone, by giving our time to have a conversation, by showing patience and tolerance, by volunteering, by a simple compliment, there are so many opportunities God gives us. With that, it's important to be introspective too and ask ourselves am I too quick to judge, am I too loose with the gossip, what language do I use over race and politics at the dinner table or on social media especially in front of the kids, and is my heart becoming hardened. What occurred in Shaksville was a product of what Susan experienced growing up, because the hearts of the people were like soil prepared for that love to grow. So must it be with us as we strive to love one another.

It is so important to remember there will be differences we have that will always be there. Some of these will cause friction; and we as Christians also cannot avoid conflict. We have a moral obligation to preach the truth like Ezekiel. People will often hate us for the truth as they hated the prophets and killed our Lord. But the response to this cannot be anger and frustration or giving up, or just venting to like-minded people. Our response in this world which can have so much anger and hate needs to be one of perseverance; of not backing down in speaking out for what we believe in, but also remembering how God loves all of creation, and that, as we learned on 9/11, while a small group of people can inflict such evil, far greater is the power of good, to make a difference, from what happened in Shanksville, to the generosity of a tribe in Kenya who wanted to help when they learned of what happened on 9/11 so sent 14 cows to the United States as a gift in their attempt to help people they had never met. May we like them and so many others be a people of hope, truly going and making a difference, living out the words "love your neighbor" as a way of life.