

September 12th

Good morning. Before I begin my sermon, I want to take a brief moment to recognize my good friend Mike Fuccile. As I am sure most of you have heard by now either in the papers, on TV or word of mouth Mike lost his life this past Thursday on his commute to work. There are simply no words to describe the void that has been created in so many hearts by this loss. I have yet to get through a day where I have not shed a tear for his wife Nancy, his three children Michael, Jack and Brooke. Mike was a great man who was very dedicated to his family and this fine town. He coached baseball, basketball and soccer and even had two teams he coached in baseball and soccer, one for each of his boys. He always wore a smile, was quick to laugh and was genuinely one of the finest people I knew. He coached my son Jared all 3 seasons of baseball and I was lucky enough to get to be one of his assistants this past season. We had 3 rules for the team which were laid down and reinforced every game by Coach Mike. Number 1: Tuck your shirt in and look like a ball player. Number 2: Always try your hardest and do your best and Number 3: MAKE SOME NOISE! He wanted the boys to encourage their teammates by cheering the team and each other as loud as they could. They were to support one another and always remain positive. He knew that if the 6 and 7 year old boys were allowed to get loud that they would most certainly also have fun. Now I seriously contemplated stepping aside for this sermon even though it's been scheduled for months because I just wasn't sure I could do it. But every day since I keep hearing Mike cheering for me as loud as he can and telling me to go for it. So in his honor and with a gaping hole in my soul, I say to Mike, "wherever you are buddy, this one's for you"

So why am I here today and what is it that I have to say? It is an honor that Sam would yield the pulpit to me on any given Sunday but to allow me this place on the First Sunday of our new program year is in a word, humbling. He remains a guide, an inspiration but mostly my friend. This sermon is something that Sam and I have discussed for over a year and a half in one form or another but honestly it was HIS sermon last April that finally put me into action. It was that sermon that inspired my pen to paper and finger to keyboard. It was that sermon that opened my heart enough to ease the fear of standing before you all and speaking these words. It was that sermon. A sermon entitled "Battle Scars". I am sure some of you recall it. Quite frankly I can not forget it. He told us to openly bear our wounds and not hide our pain. Share with others our scars and we'll be rewarded. That it was Christian, the most Christian thing to do in fact, to show our wounds to others much like Christ did to his Disciples upon resurrection, to demonstrate our faith in redemption. If we are open and honest to the world that we struggle just like everyone else yet maintain our faith in Christ then others will surely follow and seek the same promise.

Now today is September 7th. In four days this country will remember the

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7th anniversary of the deadliest attack on American soil. What we all now know simply as 9 - 11. It is a day that is not forgotten across the globe but here in NJ, a place where the towers shadow was once cast, a place that lost 675 residents, even some from this town, it brings a greater, deeper sadness. It is a day I must admit I once begged God to help me forget, a prayer now I am thankful He did not answer. You see I was there that day. Not just in Manhattan. I was there. In the World Trade Center. I was on the last PATH train that let passengers off and it was after the 1st plane had struck. I will never forget ascending from the depths of the basement up the long escalator that took you to the concourse level. I honestly remember thinking to myself "it sounds like something fun is going on up there" For those who don't remember or know, when you came up to the ground level you entered a shopping mall. They would often have things going on, promotions, or sales. Sometimes bands or music would be playing. I recall that morning was one of the most beautiful we had had and the sky was clear, humidity low and the air crisp. From all indications it was to be a wonderful early autumn day. I couldn't wait to see what was going on. But as I crest the top, I found chaos. Emergency lighting was flashing. People were screaming, running around. It was simply pandemonium. I remember looking in the direction of where the mall entry to tower 2 was and seeing people pouring out. Then in a flash a New York City police officer went running by screaming, "get out of the building, get out of the building. The building is on fire". Now when a cop yells at you in a sense of panic, it's probably best to do as he or she says and so I did.

As I exited building 4 headed in a southerly direction, imagine my surprise. As I looked out across the sidewalk it was littered with fireballs, very large pieces of what I now know were plane parts a blaze on the ground. I turned and looked up at tower 1 and thought to myself "the building is on fire? That's an inferno." I ran south towards Deutsche Bank, which was my employer at the time, and navigated through the debris which upon further inspection included not only plane parts but office items, building parts and things not really requiring detail from this pulpit. You can imagine. When I got to Deutsche they were not allowing us in the building. Rather we were all congregated on the corner of Liberty and Greenwich Streets. I made a call to Suzi, my wife, to see if she knew what was going on and to let her know where I was. Shortly after ending that call, a very dark shadow passed over and the world around me exploded with fire, heat, shaking and debris. The second plane had struck no more than 100 yards from where I stood. I once read it was like a 3.2 earthquake on the richter scale. All I felt was pure terror. While people watched TV in shock, those of us on the ground ran. It all happened so fast. We did not know what to do, what was next, where to go? You just run. Eventually I stopped with a small group of coworkers outside the Battery Park Parking Garage further down Greenwich Street. Since we were already south of the buildings, we just ran further

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away in the opposite direction of the towers which turns out to not be a good escape route. We set our stuff down and talked. I tried to call Suzi over and over again with no luck. We watched the towers billow smoke and speculated what was happening. Of course people started talking of terrorism, others weren't certain. We did not know what to do or where to go. Cars were all stopped. There were people everywhere but the thought of getting further away just didn't occur to us. Where would we go? Almost all of the people I was with had arrived on trains that were now under two towering infernos. Looking back at a timeline now, I know that it was almost 40 minutes before this scene would change but in my memory the next part remains so vivid it's as if it had only taken 5.

At approximately 9:45AM my call to my loving wife finally rang through. She answered with such nervous anticipation and we were both so thrilled to talk to each other. I explained where I was and that again I was OK. She told me that I needed to get out of there that they were talking of terrorism on TV. That moments earlier the Pentagon had been hit and they didn't know what was next. I yelled to my friends and they all gasped now knowing the people pushing the terrorism theory were right. I looked up at the towers and started to tell Suzi what I saw and in that moment I felt the greatest fear I have ever felt in my life. I watched as the top half of Tower 2 appeared to slide off and then begin to pancake. The rumble could be felt and the noise grew exponentially. I saw the cloud of dust and debris start barreling down Greenwich and all I could say was "Oh my God". I hung up the phone, stuck it in my pocket and ran. I ran like I was 15 years old. If I could have fired up afterburners out of my shoes I would have. I hit the mouth of the Battery Tunnel along side of a friend who dove in an empty car but I kept running. People were screaming "dont go in there, dont go in there. They'll hit that next." It didn't matter to me, any where was better than where I was, and so I ran. I remember passing a bus full of passengers who had been apparently waiting in there for over an hour when they had stopped incoming traffic. The looks on their faces were panicked as they saw the crowd of us come flying down past their bus. I had mostly run fast enough and down enough to escape the dust but it was certainly getting thick. We found a crossover tunnel that connected from the inbound side we were in to the outbound side. It was an empty tunnel and had no dust. I jogged and rode on the back of an ambulance like a sanitation worker the rest of the way which if you've never been in that tunnel is about 2 miles long. It felt like it was 20. As we got to the other end, an emergency vehicle was just arriving and the First Aiders climbed out to treat those of us first exiting. A man approached me and said "Sir are you OK? are you OK?" I responded, "I am fine but where am I?" He said, "Oh you better have a seat" and I rather frustratingly said, "No I am fine, seriously WHERE am I?" He looked at me quizzically and said, "you're in Brooklyn". You see I am very much a Jersey Boy and I must admit that I thought the

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Battery Tunnel went to Staten Island. I now know the full name of the tunnel is the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. I wasn't close to home but I was safe.

I walked up to the gas station on the corner and bought two things like any good former boy scout would. One was a bottle of water and the other was a map of Brooklyn. I did know some folks in Brooklyn and Suzi reached them via phone and I was able to use my map to find their house. I spent the rest of the day there in shock and watching TV like everyone else in the world and hoping beyond hope to just go home to see Suzi, my then 2 year old daughter Alexa and my 3 month old son Jared. The rest of my family had all congregated at my house and we got to talk on the phone. I was assured Alexa had no idea what was going on and that everyone was so happy to hear from me. Eventually the authorities would open up the bridges outbound after 9PM and I was able to borrow a car and make it back to Metuchen. I held Suzi so tight and told her how much I loved her. She told me she had let Alexa sleep in our bed and that I should go see her. As I cuddled up next to my little girl I couldn't help but pick her up and place her on my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and hugged. She awoke smiled at me, gave me a kiss and said the words I will never ever forget, "Hi Daddy, I saw your castle fall down on TV today" I cried and I cried and held her knowing just how lucky I was to be home.

Now while it was important to me to tell you all my 9/11 story it is not the message I want you to take home. To hear that message I need to tell you about my journey of healing from it. For the first two years I denied any problem. But I was angry. Angry with everyone. Angry at the world. Angry with work, it took me there that day. Angry with my wife because I had to go to work so she could stay home with the kids. Angry with New Jersey for being so close to New York. I used to joke I wanted to pick up and move my family to a hole in Nebraska. Everyone would chuckle at me but I meant it. This wasn't a conscious anger. I didn't go around yelling at people. More often than not it was subconscious. I was just simmering inside and a pretty miserable person. I had a lot of trouble sleeping and suffered from continuous nightmares. Sometimes in these dreams I was on the front lines of a war where the enemy was shooting planes at us. Other nights it would be more real but this time I didn't escape the rubble. As the lack of sleep continued I would become even more irritable. By the second anniversary of 9/11 in 2003 Suzi was at a point where she knew I needed help. My selfish pride and the consuming anger wouldn't allow me to admit that she was right.

I made a small effort to talk to my Grandfather who is here with us in the audience today. The man is my hero. He has helped me in every way a grandfather can throughout my life and I have been blessed to have had him

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be such a part of it. He served during World War II in the 6th Naval Beach Battalion as a pharmacist mate aka medic and was part of the second wave of D-Day. At +65 minutes after the launch of the invasion his landing craft opened on Easy Red Omaha Beach at Normandy and he was one of the many men who charged into the fire. If you've ever seen the opening sequences of Saving Private Ryan and recall the medic screaming "just give them a chance" as he's unable to help those dying around him fast enough, than you know the role my grandfather played. I was ashamed to make the parallel since I had run as fast I could away from death and he charged into it but I had heard some of his tales and thought maybe he could help. I asked him, "will I ever forget what I saw that day?" He answered me honestly and said, "No Justin you won't. It will fade over the years but you will always remember." With that I knew that it wasn't going to just "go away" and after significant resistance I agreed to talk with a professional. I learned of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and through about a year of counseling was able to overcome some of my bigger challenges. Things seemed to be getting better. I started getting involved in things that had once interested me. Started to take a more active role in the community again and my marriage was headed in the right direction.

Then without warning on May 27, 2005 a proverbial plane flew into the side of me. My father at the young age of 52 years old died of a massive and sudden heart attack. He never saw it coming and neither did we. I had never lost a person in my life. Not a grandparent. Not an aunt or uncle a friend, no one. My father was my mentor, and despite our like minded arguing, he was my best friend. When he and my mother learned of her pregnancy at the age of 18 there were so many things they could have done but they chose to marry and raise me and give me their everything. I am a product of their labor and their love and I am eternally grateful. At his funeral held here in the sanctuary, as I eulogized him, I told the story of how very much unlike myself I had bought his Father's Day card several weeks early at the same time I had picked up my Mom's birthday card. I had missed my chance to give it to him so I read it to the audience that day. Over 3 years later, I still have that card and read it very often. It is here with me today and I want to read it to you:

"The older I get, the more I realize what an important influence you've been in my life. I see the way you've guided my decisions while encouraging me to stand on my own, the way you've offered suggestions and opinions while accepting me as I am, the way you've supported my endeavors while allowing me the freedom to experience the world for myself. You never let me down, and I want you to know I appreciate it... So for all the times I've left it unsaid, I want to thank you now for the understanding, the caring and the love you've shown in so many special ways. Happy Father's Day"

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And therein lies my message. In the wake of 9/11 a friend once said that in those days that followed the event, this nation was one where the distance between us all got a little smaller. We were patient. We were kind. We made the extra effort for others and we paused to enjoy each passing day. We told those around us how much we loved them and we picked up the phone to call friends from long ago. We were Americans.

In my own wallowing, self pity and anger I had missed the message in 9/11. It took great loss for me to finally understand, to mature enough to realize the value in each day. The incredible blessings of my family, my friends, this community, this Church. I learned to love every day and never hesitate to say it. I learned to speak my mind and say what I believe. I learned, what I hope you will too, we will never forget September 11th but we MUST always remember September 12th. Amen.