

Father O'Connor's Homily for 12 September 2021
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Isaiah 50: 5-9a

James 2: 14-18

Mark 8: 27-35

This weekend we remember the nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives as victims of the terrorist attacks on our country on 11 September 2001, twenty years ago yesterday. We pray for all of our men and women in military service, our police, our firefighters and our first-responders. We also pray for all who died, and we remember their families and their friends who love them and who still grieve for them.

We love and serve a merciful and compassionate God. But we can wonder, "Where is the mercy and compassion of God today?"

I thought perhaps a Charlie Brown story might help us:

Charlie Brown is leaning against a tree talking with Lucy. She asks, "What do you think security is, Charlie Brown?"

Charlie answers, "Security is sleeping on the back seat of the car at night when you're a little kid, and you've been somewhere with your mom and dad. You don't have to worry about a thing. They will get you home safely and tuck you in your bed."

Lucy smiles and says, "That's real neat."

Then Charlie Brown, who never seems to know when to stop, gets a serious look on his face and says, "But it doesn't last. Suddenly you're all grown up and it can never be that way again. You'll never get to sleep on the back seat again. Never!"

Lucy gets a frightened look on her face and asks, "Never?"

And Charlie Brown replies, "Never!"

They stand there, sensing the terrible loneliness. And Lucy reaches out and says, "Hold my hand, Charlie Brown."

A writer adds: "A bittersweet comic strip that registers so true today. 'We'll never get to sleep on the back seat anymore. Never.' Our old securities have been shattered. War abroad with difficult enemies, war at home with biological terror stalking our steps, the heightened fear of nuclear war, checkpoints, baggage searches, latex gloves, air marshals, long lines.

“We are learning the uncomfortable stance of always looking over our shoulders. We’ve suddenly become a nation of Lucys: ‘Hold my hand, Charlie Brown.’”

Or, as we might pray here today, “Take my hand, Precious Lord.”

We can wonder, “Where is the mercy and compassion of God today?” The Scriptures this weekend help us to answer that question.

In the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah, we read: “The Lord God is my help. Therefore I am not disgraced.... See, the Lord God is my help. Who will prove me wrong?”

Our Psalm response was from Psalm 116, and in the third stanza we read: “Gracious is the Lord and just. Yes, our God is merciful. The Lord keeps the little ones. I was brought low and He saved me.”

And in Mark’s Gospel, we read: “Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it.”

We love and serve a merciful and compassionate God. And we can see evidence of this if we take the time to notice.

I will leave you with a story about a hymn that so many of you love. Lots of hymns were written in the throes of tragedy. “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” is one of them, written by Thomas Andrew Dorsey [1899-1993], an African-American musician. He composed it after the death of his wife, Nettie, and their infant son. Dorsey himself provides an account of the circumstances surrounding his composition of this famous song:

Back in 1932 I was 32 years old and a fairly new husband. My wife, Nettie, and I were living in a little apartment on Chicago’s Southside. One hot August afternoon I had to go to St. Louis where I was to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. I didn’t want to go. Nettie was in the last month of pregnancy with our first child. But a lot of people were expecting me in St. Louis.

In the steaming St. Louis heat, the crowd called on me to sing again and again. When I finally sat down, a messenger boy run up with a Western Union telegram. I ripped open the envelope. Pasted on the yellow sheet were the words: YOUR WIFE JUST DIED.

When I got back, I learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. I swung between grief and joy. Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together in the same casket. Then

I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write any more gospel songs.

But on the following Saturday evening, I sat down at the piano and my hands began to browse over the keys.

And "Precious Lord" came to be, and it became the most famous of Thomas Dorsey's gospel songs. The stanzas capture the grief not only of Dorsey, but of anyone who has suffered a devastating loss. And each stanza of the hymn concludes with the refrain: "Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home."

Here is stanza one:

Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home.

[Breaking Bread, #663]

Our world today is very different from the one that we left when we went to bed twenty years ago on 10 September 2001. "Suddenly we can never sleep on the back seat anymore."

But one thing has not changed, and will never will: we love and serve a merciful God, and we can see evidence of God's compassion all around us, if we take the time to notice: in our families, in our parishes, in our communities, and in our neighbors near and far.

As we reach out to others who need us, it is Jesus who takes hold of our hands. For He taught us that "whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for Me" [Matthew 25: 40].

"Hold my hand, Jesus. Take my hand, Precious Lord. Lead me home."