November 6, 2011 They Have Taken Our Place Galatians 2:1-10
Grace United Church, 156 Main St. N., Brampton Rev. Ross Leckie

As our service was beginning this morning the names and pictures of 162 Canadians were flashed before you. These persons have died on our behalf in the last 9 years of Canada's presence in Afghanistan. This all began with the terrorist attacks on the United States of America, resulting in almost 3000 deaths on September 11, 2001. Four U.S. airliners were turned into guided missiles after they were hijacked by al-Qaeda suicide bombers and crashed into three sites in the United States.

Two of the planes struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, igniting fires that destroyed the 110-storey landmarks, while a third crashed into the west wing of the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth plane, which was believed to be heading for the White House, crashed in a field 120 kilometers southeast of Pittsburgh.

The first airplane to fly in to the towers was American Airlines Flight 11. My first cousin, Wayne is a retired airline pilot and he passed this story on to me this week. First officer, Steve Scheibner has been with American Airlines for over 20 years. He flies their largest airplanes, the 757 and 767 models. The story begins on September 10, 2001. Steve was available to fly on September 11 and as is usual for him, that afternoon, he went on-line to see what flights were open for a pilot the next day. He checked flight availability and saw that no one had yet claimed the position of first officer for Flight 11 leaving the next morning from Boston's Logan airport, destined for Los Angeles. So Steve filled in his name.

He assumed this was a pretty sure thing. There would only be about an hour for a more senior pilot to log in and take the position, but that rarely happened. Steve told his wife that he would be flying to Los Angeles the next day, leaving home about 6:00 am. He went out to the car, picked up his flight bag and emptied it in the laundry room. He then filled it up again with clean clothes and replaced it in the trunk of the car, all set to go. Steve's wife ironed his shirt and helped him prepare for the next day, all in their normal routine.

Though the pilot makes his arrangements by computer, there is always a phone call late in the day to confirm the next morning's flight commitment. No phone call came. It wasn't that out of the ordinary and it actually means that the pilot will get paid for the flight regardless and so he now knew that he could do other things the next day. He began to think about what he would do instead of take that early morning flight out.

Later, Steve would find out that what had happened is that Tom McInnes, a pilot with a bit more seniority had called in just within a half hour of Steve's log in and checked whether he could technically 'bump' Steve in order to take the flight instead. Tom was told, indeed he could do that if he could confirm it immediately, so he did. That next morning Tom McInnes sat in that first officer's position of Flight 11. It was a beautiful day on the eastern seaboard and things began according to plan. Tom took the controls and flew the plane to an altitude of 23000' before he engaged the auto pilot to direct the plane toward Los Angeles-"then all hell broke loose." The hijackers stabbed 2 flight attendants and 'stormed' the cockpit where they took control of the airplane.

Shortly after 9:30 am, those of us watching television or listening to the radio, began to hear news reports of what had happened to American Airlines flight 11 and in fact saw live pictures of the second plane crashing in to the other World Trade Center

office tower. Neither, Steve or his wife were listening to the news. In fact there were a group of workers at their home doing some renovations and they got word of the tragedy. They knew that Steve worked for American Airlines and the kind of planes he flew. The foreman for the job called Steve's wife and asked where Steve was. They thought they were going to have to deal with a distraught woman whose husband had just died. About the same time Steve received a call on his cell phone from a friend who also knew Steve's schedule. When she heard his voice she began to cry.

Steve received other calls and by now he knew what had happened. He responded, it's ok, I'm fine and wasn't on that plane. He called all of his family members to assure them he was ok.

It took Steve a number of minutes to absorb really what had happened, here. He began to wonder specifically what had happened on that flight. He knew there would be plenty of 'checks' to avoid the general public finding out those kind of things, but he thought there might be a way through the internal systems he had access to. He logged in to the computer. Next to flight 11 was this information-Sequence Failed Continuity. Sequence Failed Continuity-that is code in the industry. It means the flight never made it to its destination.

When he saw Sequence Failed Continuity he was completely overwhelmed. He was curious about who had replaced him. He had packed his bags to go away, just the day before. Who had taken his place?

Steve Scheibner is an intentional, thoughtful Christian. About 10 years before this happened he had been at an event where he actually had written down his life objective. This is what he had written: "To Seek, Trust, and Glorify God. Though Humble Service and continual prayer. To raise up qualified disciples as quickly as possible, So that one day I might hear God say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

The events of September 11, 2001 intensified that objective for Steve. He had said 10 years before that he would hate to have that conversation with God and God say, "Scheibner, have a seat, I'll get to you in a few minutes." He needs to hear, "Scheibner-yes, well done, you have been my good and faithful servant, come right in." That is what is driving him these days.

Steve believes that God left him behind for some reason. He isn't sure why that is, but he feels like he needs to act like he is "living on borrowed time." He clearly sees that he should have died that day but he didn't. He has seen on television that smoking hole that could have been where he ended up. Now he lives with a sense of urgency. He feels an obligation to get the most out of every day. Not the most for Steve. He realizes that we live in a society where we are given the impression that we need to get the most out of life personally.

Steve sees that he has had the distinct privilege of knowing someone died in his place. What he knows is that someone died in his place, not once but twice, as he sees it. That is where God comes in to it. By rights Tom was in his seat. He was qualified to be in that seat and by rights it should have been him there. He had flown all of the American Airlines 757s and 767s, he actually had flown that very plane and sat in that seat in the past. One person sat in a seat that I should have been in. The second he says is Jesus Christ dying for him on the cross.

Today we remember those who have taken our place. Some climbed a famous hill 'under fire' where the rain kept the mud slippery and wounds became easily infected. Some worked in a field hospital tending those wounded and their facility was targeted by the enemy. Some took their shift in the trenches and got caught in the cross fire. Some returned home with shattered limbs or shattered minds. Some sought adventure and ended up in the tailgunner position of a Lancaster bomber. Some were the crew that maintained that same Lancaster. More recently some were doing reconnaissance in a LAV which was taken out by a 'rogue' landmine. Regardless, those men and women gave of themselves for our freedom. They have looked tyranny in the eye and sought to diminish it in the world. They have taken our place.

Paul went to Jerusalem to insure the message of Christ was not caught in legalism. He was determined to preserve the truth of the way of Christ for all. His assignment from the world leaders of the church of the day was to take the Good News to the gentiles and to take responsibility for the poor. Ministering to the poor has characterized the Christian church across the centuries.

As Steve Scheibner said, I now need to get the most out of every day. Not for me, but for the needs of others. Ministry to people is about their physical need and their spiritual need. We offer both of these because they flow from Christ's redeeming love as expressed in the lives of His followers. Thanks be to God!

Acknowledging inspiration from:
Bob Jones University, Student Project Portrays 9/11 Testimony of American Airlines pilot, by Peter Scheibner