

13th Sunday after Pentecost, RCL, Year A

Sept. 3, 2017

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
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The Gift of Oneself

This past week the world watched in horror as the Texas coast was engulfed by the fury of Hurricane Harvey, an unprecedented natural catastrophe of epic proportion for our nation. It's impossible to imagine the extent of the damage to Houston and all the surrounding towns. Millions of people have been left homeless by the raging flood waters. Lives have been tragically lost, families stranded and separated. Many have been left without potable water or adequate food or medicine. In Houston alone a half million cars were underwater as streets and highways turned into canals. One person reported that Houston looked like a vast sea with dots of tiny islands that were once neighborhoods and business areas. Now toxic chemicals and bacteria have polluted the receding flood waters, causing serious health threats.

I have relatives in Houston and I spoke with one cousin who is devastated after he and his wife lost their home to the torrential flood waters. They were able to save a few items before having to abandon their home as the water rose to five feet. When I last spoke to him the water was still chest high and they were unable to get back into the house. And, they are a few of the lucky ones because they survived without physical injury and they have the resources to rebuild their home and their lives. Most have not been this fortunate.

It is both humbling and terrifying to witness the brutal force of nature of this magnitude. However, with the horrendous images of suffering, destruction and chaos we view on the news networks we also learn of the incredible stories of courage, sacrifice, resiliency and compassion. These stories make this human tragedy bearable and, I daresay, redeemable. They give us the reassurance that we are not alone. Even though it will take months and even years for Texas to recover and rebuild, we are witnesses to the indomitable human spirit.

These stories are vital to us all, to both the survivors and to the rest of us who are watching this epic event unfold. They are essential because they remind us that no matter the extent of the devastation, we will not be overcome by death and destruction. Good, ordinary people put aside their own worries and concerns for personal safety, some tragically losing their life, to reach out and do what they could to help whomever is in need, both neighbor and stranger alike. This is humanity at its best. In the midst of this horrendous disaster we have reason to find hope; hope grounded in our faith in a living God that will not abandon us to face our perils alone.¹

Anglican priest and scholar, Samuel Wells, recently stated that “God is most fully disclosed at times of our greatest distress and despair.”² God is present in the many selfless acts of ordinary people during extraordinary times. This is what Paul is talking about in his letter to the church in Rome. God is most visible when we “offer ourselves for service.”³ Paul instructs us how we are to live our lives, both as individuals and as a community of faith. We are to hate what is evil and to hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection and extend hospitality to strangers (Rom. 12:9-21). A mark of a Christian is one who contributes to the needs of others, giving hospitality to strangers without concern or regard for oneself. We saw this played out over and over this past week in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and it continues.

Four bakers in a Mexican bakery were trapped with the rising flood waters for 2 days last weekend in Houston. The store remained dry and they still had power so they used this time to take their minds off worrying about their loved ones and help their neighborhood by baking bread and pan dulce, Mexican sweet bread, throughout the night and the next day. By the time they were rescued by the owner the bakers had made hundreds of loaves of bread, using 4,400 pounds of flour, which was distributed to several emergency shelters across the city for hungry flood victims.

The news is filled with stories of first responders, police, fire fighters, EMT and citizens who came from all over the city, parts of Texas, as well as other states, to give aid those in need. One civilian volunteer was wading in waist deep water and was asked by a reporter why he came out in the storm. He said he was here to help save lives. Hundreds of volunteers, known as the Cajun Navy, plus other similar groups, spontaneously converged with their boats in the Houston area to offer help to anyone in need. They rescued families from rooftops, helped rescue the elderly from submerged cars and did what they could to help victims, as well as their beloved pets, escape the rising flood waters.

When we reach out to one another, whether in a moment of crisis or in the course of an ordinary day, we begin to understand in a most visceral way that we are truly one Body in Christ, connected to each other by our humanness and our need for each other and for God. This is the message Jesus is sharing with his disciples in Matthew’s gospel. They must be willing to set aside their own worries and concerns, pick their cross and follow Jesus. Paradoxically, the way of the cross is the path to a true and abundant life; a life grounded in love and compassion for one another. We see this love and compassion in the way Jesus lived and taught his disciples to live. And, we have seen the same love and compassion shown by ordinary people in countless stories

¹ Thomas Merton, Thomas Merton Prayer, http://www.elise.com/quotes/thomas_merton_prayer, last accessed on Sept. 2, 2017.

² Samuel Wells, “Hovering over the Deep,” *The Christian Century*, August 16, 2017., Vol. 134, No. 17, p.28.

³Elizabeth Shively, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2101, last accessed on Sept. 1, 2017.

this past week as they take up the cross to help one another. We are called to do likewise. This is how we live out our faith, be being of service to others. This is how we are united in the living Body of Christ, reaching out in love as if it were Christ himself.

Amen.