

What We Do When Disaster Strikes  
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Matthew 25:31-40

How to deal with a catastrophe like Katrina? What to do when all we see is mind-numbing destruction and suffering, when we are shocked into silence by the agonizing pace of rescue and relief, stunned by the breakdown of order, scandalized by the exposure of deep socio-economic fault-lines, and exhausted by the prospect of a long, hard road ahead? How do we get our hearts, heads, souls and hands around this disastrous thing that has happened to our brothers and sisters, to their cities and towns, to their neighborhoods, to their way of life, to the land—and by solidarity, to us all? What do we do?

First, we face up to it and we trust God. We do not deny our horror. We do not piously gloss over the fact that in life things happen that are often cruel, unfair and painful. We do not say that bad things are God's plan for our good or God's punishment for our sin. We accept that many questions have no fully-satisfying answers. We acknowledge, with reverence for the silence of the dead and the groans of the living, that life is a mystery, fragile and unsure. And so as we enter the mystery of loss and pain, we trust God to hold onto us and to preserve us in the time of trial, so that we are not soul-destroyed by the inexplicable sorrows of our human existence. And we cling to each other with the same trust, hoping to find in our life-together in community that same sort of soul-preserving safety.

We pray. We pray because prayer focuses our attention on what matters. We pray because prayer stimulates and sustains our empathy. We pray because prayer binds us with cords of compassion to the people for whom we pray. We pray because we believe that in Jesus Christ God shares our grief and will, somehow, draw near to us, will somehow lend healing and comfort, hope and strength. We pray even when we are not sure what we are praying for, why we are praying, or whether prayer even “works.” Theology takes a back seat to need, and we pray because we feel helpless to do anything else. Our helplessness becomes our deepest, and perhaps our best, prayer.

We also act. Taking action helps overcome depression and paralyzing fear. It stems bitterness and creates hope. We offer services, skills, ingenuity. We volunteer with relief agencies and work with town officials to welcome hurricane evacuees into Boston area homes, hospitals and schools. We demand answers, we write letters to the press and to Congress, we take political action long into the future to engage the many complex issues raised by this epic event. We give blood. We give clothing. But mostly we give money.

We give money because it is effective to give money. Money will make the difference. We give money because it is the right thing to do, and we give money because we can. If we have the resources that desperate people need, it is (according to today’s gospel) damning of us to withhold them. And so we give, for “when I was hungry you fed me, when I was thirsty you gave me a drink, when I was naked, you clothed me...”

We give to better the plight of others. But the truth is that we are better for it too. Giving blesses us in ways we cannot imagine, including bestowing upon us the inestimable gift of becoming a generous person, of losing the fear that we will not have what we need for ourselves if we give something substantial away. And what we give has to be substantial, because this hurricane has stripped hundreds of thousands of people of every possession and, in too many cases, also of people they loved. Their involuntary dispossession is a challenge to those of us who have escaped (escaped, that is, this time—for it could just as well have been us, and no one escapes trouble forever) to take stock of what we value, to revise our estimation of what it means to live well, and to think more soberly about what we can, voluntarily, do without. Now, we cannot know in the abstract what we are able to do without. We can only know it by actually doing without the thing we think we need. We only know it when we put ourselves at risk. And so we give.

There is another thing we do when disaster strikes. We try to live. We try to be human. I don't know quite how to explain this business about trying to be human, about trying to live, so let me tell you a few stories, and maybe that will help.

In the days immediately after 9/11, I was so mindful that on one bright Logan Airport morning, thousands had left their homes and had never returned that for a while after that catastrophe I made sure that when I closed the door behind me every day, I left home well. And so if after I closed the front door it seemed to me that my good-bye had been perfunctory, even if I was already halfway down the

block, I would go back and say it again, this time with more care and affection. It was probably a little obsessive-compulsive, but I had a sharp awareness that that one blessed, beautiful morning was all we had, and that there was no guarantee that it would be one of many more to come.

In the week immediately after the Asian tsunami, I remember turning off the awful pictures on TV one night and going to the kitchen to prepare carrots for supper. For some reason it seemed incredibly important in that quiet moment to wash them very well. To slice them exquisitely. To move deliberately, even gracefully, from the sink to the counter to the stovetop. To clean up in the same deliberate way. Maybe I was just trying to establish some order in the midst of chaos, but it seemed to me instead that I was a worshipper, bowing before the radiant gift of the ordinary.

And last Wednesday night, as the full horror of what the hurricane had done was dawning on the world, Anne and I went to a Spinners baseball game in Lowell. It was the usual goofy, family-friendly nonsense you get in ballparks where the lowest of the low in the minor leagues play the game. There were silly contests every half-inning, VW bugs racing around the bases, astounding Frisbee dogs leaping all over the place, grown men in electric green alligator costumes throwing free T-shirts into the stands. It was a beautiful night, the hot dogs were cheap, and, after a bad start, the home team won. It was as weird, and as precious, a time as I've spent anywhere in a long, long while.

Some of you will remember that corny old Thornton Wilder play, *Our Town*. If you

are my age, you may have had to read it in junior high school. It's about the people of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. A young woman named Emily has died, but fourteen years later she is given a chance to return to earth and to her people for a little while. When she returns, it's as if no one knows that she's been gone, as if she'd never left. And so there she is with her mother in the kitchen of her home, as her mother is preparing a birthday dinner for her. To her mother, it's routine. To Emily, it's anything but. She is seeing everything as if for the first time, and as if for the last time. She says:

*We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.*

To realize earth. To realize life while we live it. I think that's what I'm trying to say we do when disaster strikes.

Later in the play, the character of the Stage Manager notes that only saints and poets are able to sustain this realization of earth for any length of time. Prosaic sinners like me realize it only occasionally, and then we quickly forget. Only once in a while do we taste and see how blessed we are—blessed with people to love, with ordinary routines to carry out, with simple joys to savor. Only occasionally do we experience the elemental stuff as if for the first time, or as if for the last. But when that window opens, we are overcome. We are entirely grateful and

completely satisfied with just a few things—a loving word as you go out the door, a carrot to peel and dice, a crazy dog that leaps happily after a Frisbee in the outfield where a lowly minor leaguer waits for the little show to end and the big one to begin.

And when the window opens, we know that catastrophe is not the last word we will ever hear. Blessing is. And so we try to enter such moments. We pray to be given and to embrace more and more of them. To realize earth. To realize life.

When catastrophe hits—hurricane, bombing, tsunami, divorce, diagnosis, bankruptcy, betrayal, death, depression—what do we do? Sisters and brothers, first we trust God. Then we pray, we act, we give. And we try to live in the simplest possible way this precious human life that is our gift. We open our hearts and lift our hands to receive the immense blessings that the mystery of life is always ready to bestow.

In a few minutes we will come to this table. We call what we do here the banquet of life, the supper of love. You can ask the deacons, and they will tell you that sometimes it bothers me that the meal we share here in Jesus' memory and living presence is so skimpy. Whenever I proclaim loud and joyfully that "This is God's feast for all God's people!", it's a wonder that you don't grouse about the portion sizes. The servings are so ungenerous that I fear sometimes that they speak of a God who withholds goodness from us, not one who is foolishly extravagant. But today it might be a good thing that we seem to be "sacramental minimalists" here.

Today our ultra-light meal can prod us to imagine how greedily some people in Louisiana and Mississippi and Florida and Alabama would devour it. If they were at this table, they would help us to treasure how much grace is here, even in tiny pita squares and mini-shot glasses.

Today as we make our communion circle, I pray that we will all have one of those moments that saints and poets know, one of those moments when you realize life, and realize earth, and realize God, and realize grace. One of those moments when you know that you are completely loved, that the ordinary routines of ho-hum life are holier than all the holy prancing about we do in here, and that God means for us to live by simple joys, even silly ones, sharing who we are and what we have. And all this after the example of Jesus, who lived in just this way for our sake, and who is living still, in the suffering of our southern neighbors, in the fellowship offered at this table, and in all our hearts by faith.