

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MAY 31, 2009
PENTECOST SUNDAY

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:22-27
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Having grown up in the Southeastern United States, I learned to watch hurricanes and their movements before making landfall. One hurricane took over 1,000 trees on a golf course I played some 200 miles or so inland. When I was in the service, another hurricane took the roof off barracks some 400 miles inland. That's unusual. But none of that prepared me to comprehend Katrina.

Ordinarily a hurricane only lasts 2-4 hours and has then moved through. Katrina lasted 12-14 hours.

Normally the worst part of a hurricane is the storm surge. Along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the storm surge was 35 feet. Along the Gulf Coast in Mississippi are, or rather were, a number of casinos on barges. As barges are designed to do, they float. And when water 35 feet higher than normal comes ashore, it floats the casinos ashore with it, taking out whatever happens to be in the way, whether it happens to be homes or businesses or churches. Plus whatever damage the wind and water do by themselves.

There were buildings that had been Wal-Marts and K-Marts that had been gutted by windblown water with the upper part of the building still intact. There were slabs and steps where homes had been. I was able to ride around part of the Mississippi Gulf Coast with someone who had been in both the realty and construction business and had lived there virtually his whole life. He could not locate houses, or rather where the houses had been, even though he had built them and knew the people who had lived there. All the familiar landmarks were gone.

One neighborhood fairly near the coast was spared major damage because a hospital between it and the Gulf provided enough of a windbreak that they were protected from the worst of the hurricane.

When Katrina came through, something remarkable happened.

Not the hurricane, though the hurricane gave occasion for the remarkable happening.

The hurricane faced the people of Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, for a time, with a power that was awesomely destructive and out of their control. The serenity of a benign natural world suddenly became hostile.

To the extent that human beings are given to measuring our worth by our accomplishments and the material symbols of these accomplishments, that is, the things we own, we were confronted with a power that rendered such measurements of our worth meaningless by capriciously taking some and leaving others.

There had been available to them some predictable kinds of alternatives. A couple of these were the classic fight or flight responses.

Along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, most took some kind of flight response. Most waited — not knowing what had happened — hoping for the best, fearing the worst. Waiting without knowing and feeling helpless. The home that represented a place of safety was no longer a safe place when what we wanted most was to feel safe.

We are not used to feeling helpless. We are used to taking charge of life and making things happen — or, at least, having the opportunity to shape our own destiny.

That helplessness was not just for those who were evacuated. The hurricane did it to everyone. People could offer little but a haven as safe as they could make it and the reminder that human life is more valuable than human possessions.

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT — 2

In the months that have followed, there were other kinds of responses as well that were less obvious. Some people found that parts of themselves had simply collapsed before the threat and fell into hopelessness because, if so much could be taken from them so quickly, there seemed to be no point in doing anything.

One person told me of the numbers of people in whom he sees symptoms of clinical depression.

When the hurricane came through — taking without permission — it took from everyone their sense of control.

Even though a part of that sense of control was an illusion to begin with, the part that is true (the control people really do have) will never feel quite as secure again.

But that is not really the remarkable things that happened.

The remarkable thing was what happened to the people.

There were people who went to the shopping center every day and passed by people they did not know and did not much care to know — who did not speak and were not bothered by that — who were concerned enough about their own world with its problems that they did not open themselves up to others — who regarded strangers with enough suspicion that the distance was welcome.

When the hurricane came through, that changed. The people changed. They became what one suspects they always had it in them to be but never quite were.

People gave their time and energy to help others without any particular expectations of social indebtedness or reward. One man who was unemployed immediately began helping others and making sure they got the help they needed, organizing work crews.

People became nice to each other. The hurricane created a community of shared intimacy. In some strange sense, the hurricane gave them permission for a while to be nice to each other, to let down their guard, and to reach out to each other and genuinely help each other.

In sharing together, even charity became not the demeaning handout we tend to think of it as being. Charity regained its original meaning as an expression of love.

That is the remarkable thing that happened.

* * *

The sad thing is that it was not going to last. Only days later, some people were already changing back.

The further they got away from the hurricane and what it did, the more people settled back into life as usual.

The stranger that they would have spoken to would pass us by without a word and with scarcely a glance. The help offered may eventually seldom occur to us even as a thought. I saw places where homes had been with messages painted on pieces of plywood. Some of the messages said, We are okay, with a phone number to call. Others said, We shoot to kill. Presumably written to potential looters.

The further they get away from the hurricane, the more they will change back.. Now it seems in New Orleans houses in poorer neighborhoods which are relatively undamaged are being condemned, so that developers can reap profits.

* * *

Wouldn't it be nice if people could stay as close as they were then to being the best people we have it in us to be?

I believe that God has called into existence a people that God expects to live like that all the time, that God expects to take those kind of risks — without expectation of indebtedness to the helpers but as a response of gratitude to God — to be that caring and helpful all the time —

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT — 3

not just among themselves but to strangers as well — to help for no other reason but that others need it and they can give it.

I believe that God has called into existence a people that God expects to care for others — for whom they have no earthly reason to care; only that God cares.

And I believe that God calls these people the Church — and that includes you and me. I believe that God expects us not to wait for a tragedy to make it safe for us to be so caring and helpful but to do it all the time.

Christians are changed by what Christ did in the crucifixion and resurrection. Christians, who would seem to be powerless, were changed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

* * *

Paul wrote to the Romans, *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

There is a sense about labor pains that, once they have begun, they will not stop until they are complete. They carry the momentum. There are breathing exercises to ease them. Drugs to reduce them. Once the pain begins it is going to finish, whether it takes longer and hurts more than we want.

There was that sense about the world to which Paul wrote, and there is that sense about our contemporary world. The one constant in the last few decades has been the rate of change, and the predictions are that it will only accelerate.

In 1940, a study was done in California among school teachers. They were asked to identify their worst problems in schools. The list was: talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of line, improper clothing, and not putting trash in waste baskets. The same question was asked of California teachers in 1990. The list was: drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.

Our world groans in labor pains that carry us along and, at times, overwhelm us, for we creatures have our own rhythms and our own internal pace that operates at its own speed, which is slower than technological change, slower than societal change.

* * *

Katrina came and changed people, even as far away as Blacksburg. People feared Katrina more than they were wary of their neighbors. The hurricane did not stay, and people changed back.

The groaning world we live in generates anxiety within us. It threatens to undo us and increases anxiety among us.

I don't know that we can expect the rapid change and its accompanying anxiety to accommodate itself to us. So we seek something in the midst of our groaning to see us through.

On Pentecost, with fire and wind, the Holy Spirit came and changed people.

The way Paul explains a part of the way the Spirit comes to us is to say, *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* With sighs too deep for words. Inspiring. Breathing in us. Calvin talked about the kind of closeness with God by saying that, in the Lord's Supper, Christ is as close to the one who receives the sacrament as a tear is to the one who sheds it.

The difference between Katrina and the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit comes to us still and stays and gives us power to become the people we have it in us at our best to be — the people that God created us to be, the people that Christ died for us to become again.