

“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46.1,2 NRSV).

Just five days ago I returned home from New Orleans, LA, having worked with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. This experience was a testimony to a number of things, including human suffering, powerlessness, hopelessness, and fear. This experience was mutually a testimony to human sacrifice, power, hope, and peace. In the face of such devastation, how do we, as humans respond in a spirit of trust in the Lord? How does God respond?

Upon reaching New Orleans, we were given a name of a homeowner for whom we would be working. This is the name of a real person whose home we had been charged to tear down. We entered the home, having not yet met our homeowner and were astounded by the task ahead of us. Though she had already removed her belongings, there were undeniable traces of the actual lives that had been played out in this very home, such as the glowing stars spelling out “Lauren” on the bedroom ceiling. At first, I oppressed the urge to get emotionally involved for fear of preventing myself from having any tangible, physical effect on the house. I worked that day to exhaustion and slept accordingly.

Each day I woke for work, continued to allow the situation to defeat me, and ultimately ignored it in the name of service. My spiritual connection to the situation had

to remain dormant in order for my able body to remain engaged. My understanding of the sanctity of life had to be ignored in order to restore.

As the week went on, the homeowner came and worked with us. She told her story; yet, I continued to store this information and the emotion it triggered for a time that I could sort through it. On one of our last work days, we drove through the ninth ward on our way to the house. This area was hit harder than any other, and epitomized the emotions many of us had been holding in. I did no work that morning. I could not. I finally let myself deal with the truth that had been rising in me all week, and could no longer be denied. As I mourned that morning, unable to do physical labor, I wrote to myself:

My thoughts now swim in a hurricane of emotion. Mental structures built and dwelt in over time that have been hit by enormous amount of liquid emotion, not dealt with, but left to sit over time. The only way to survive that over which I have no control is to evacuate these structures built of my own power, my own reason, and submit to that which I cannot control.

It was at this time that I began to understand my own response, my actions, my subconscious motivations, and perhaps my place in creation. These elements enable me to describe how I should trust in the Lord in times of emergency, how I see God providing for human need, and how people should respond to others in times of crisis.

It is unreasonable to expect humans to face emergency with the true peace that so many pose as ideal in a disastrous situation. It is a betrayal to the humanity into which we are created. It is not our place as humans to feel the supreme control that we

long for. It is our nature to desire the estate from which we have fallen, but simultaneously we must comprehend the pains of that fall, as “the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called *original sin*; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it” (WSC, 18).

Despite the pains of the death to which we are now subject, we can trust in life as “partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ, by the effectual application of it to us by his Holy Spirit” (WSC 29). What is it to trust in life? When all is taken from us, or so it appears, life remains. In his story, Job cries out to God and to others about all that God has stripped from him, and even cries that he may be stripped of his life or that he should have been better having never had life (Job 3). Job still has life. Whether he desires this life or not, he possesses that from which any other human possession must proceed. It is often difficult to see how life without any of the things we see it consisting of or any hope can be a blessing. But life is hope. If we still have our life, we have the opportunity to make something new.

Two primary problems can be derived from such a response. First, not all are left with life in such a sense. Second, such an explanation belittles the resounding pain resulting in such devastation and merely is a witness to my lack of understanding.

The former suggests that life is merely a presence of breath. We are guaranteed more than breath in the life given by our redeemer. We are guaranteed “grace [that] might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5.21 NRSV). In reserving the gift of life for ourselves, we

reserve more than the presence of breath, but the claim to a life beyond our understanding, and contrary to our sensory evidence. As humans this is a difficult claim to make, but our faith suggests it is so, even if we cannot force our minds to comprehend such. It may be an occasion in which the structures our minds have built must submit to the powerful water that overtakes them, though the water cannot be understood.

The latter problem is much more difficult to deal with. In the truth of such vast emergency, it is simply not in the nature of humans to remove our emotions so drastically from that which hurts us. It is suggested that we are to trust in the Lord in times of emergency. I am suggesting that this trust has nothing to do with a sense of inner peace or mental comprehension. Sometimes, submitting to the human instincts with which we are created may be the best way to trust in the Lord. Even sheer panic can be trust, as it is the instinct given to us. To feel hopeless is to be human. What I see as true trust in the Lord is not hope in the face of devastation, but willingness to hope though only hopelessness is felt. It is that willingness that is evidence of trust in the Lord. It is that free willingness that is neither a betrayal of what we ought to do, not what we are created as. We were "created after [God's] own image," and live "being left to the freedom of [our] own will" (WSC 10, 13). It makes us human to have a choice in the face of hopelessness; it makes us faithful to choose hope when all we have left is human life.

The question of how God provides for human need and the question of how we are to respond are inseparable. "For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one

body,” in which “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12.13, 26). We are the body; we are the hands, the hearts, the minds, the faces of Christ. The way that God provides for human need is through our response to it. God executes his eternal purpose through creation and providence (WSC 8). It is in creation that we are subject to God, and it is in providence that we take part in the execution of these decrees as God’s “most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (WSC 11). Providence is what prompts us to respond to what we are given in creation. It is through providence that we, as the body of Christ continue to embody “the living and true God” on earth (WSC 5).

It is our gift to be given the opportunity to serve, feed, inspire, and heal as Christ did. “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4.19). It is our privilege to imitate God in this way. As an entire body, “let us not love in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 Jn 3.18). The love that we know was shown to us and existed for us in action. We are to do likewise as imitators and partakers of this unconditional grace. It is our duty, according to the Holy Scriptures that we are to serve in this way (WSC 2, 3).

If each member of the body can commit to being a working part, we may actually be able to do the miraculous work of God. But to work miracles, we must choose. As an entire body, we must choose. We must continue to work the miracle of unconditional love. We must work toward serving our God, “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (WSC 4). We must commit to these attributes of God, and serve them not in word but in action. It is through the willingness of the body of Christ that God continues to work.

There are enough hands, enough hearts, enough resources, and more than enough love to work the miracles that it is our duty to work.

It is often our tendency to dwell in the mental structures we build in our own minds. It is our nature to trust what we know, and fear what we do not. It often takes disaster over which we have no control for us to remove ourselves from the confines of our solitary minds and enter into a mind of one body that lives on a love that is too great to be housed in the comprehensible. The providence is that we could work to rectify the disaster. The problem still resided in the question of why the disaster had to come about.

Though human suffering is more can be argued to be deserved, I do not believe that this disaster was earned. I do believe that it can take intense turmoil and devastation to shake us into recognizing our role and our inextricable relationship to one another. Though I am less than grateful that this horror took place, I am more than grateful of the truth that was generated from it. With each member engaged by free choice of the will, the body becomes that much more holy.

The immensity of the devastation I witnessed this last week in New Orleans was often overwhelming and seemingly hopeless. Every direction illustrated deserted desolation where life had once resided. The size of this call to action still seems too immense to rectify. As one member of one body, I offer my hands, and little more to a situation that outweighs me greatly. When I looked up at the stars as we returned to our campsite each night, I continued to be overwhelmed by my finitude in such a seemingly infinite situation. How could I, as one body, even make an impact on the situation? But

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each morning, I looked up to the stars on that ceiling, and realized that to one life, I already had.