

Font, Table and Door

Often we read scripture with the font and table in mind – standing in the midst of our two grand symbols of God’s love: the baptism into the body of Christ, and the nurture of the community by the risen Christ.

But today, we read this scripture standing by the door that leads to our labors.

We know that there is a great work not only before us, but before all the people of our nation.

Hurricane Katrina has brought suffering and destruction that rivals what our country has previously experienced.

As in our personal crises, this catastrophe has brought out the best and the worst in people.

We who know about Jesus’ cross will be saddened by the worst of behavior that we now see, but we will not linger long with our disappointment.

We know that resurrection life overcomes crucifixion experiences and that Christian compassion will overcome all acts of selfishness and hurtfulness that we now see.

So today, we listen to God’s word, thankful for font and table, but mostly mindful of the door that leads to our labors, and the work before our nation.

Listen now to God’s word.

Matthew 22:34-41

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

NRSV

Friends in Christ,

A year ago this week, our region received a record amount of rain. Plum Street in Oakmont was a small river. Parts of the Oakmont Commons looked like a pond. And the Allegheny River along Riverside Park rose to the very top of its tall banks.

Some in our church family had their homes flooded. Others had their businesses filled with muddy water. Peoples’ lives were disrupted and property was damaged or lost altogether.

But our town was here. The buildings and the roads survived. The grocery was supplied and open for business.

We know that the residents of the Gulf Coast are in a situation more desperate than we experienced:

- Villages have been leveled
- Infrastructure fractured and in some cases broken

In these days following the hurricane, we see clearly what God has been telling us forever: we cannot love God without loving our neighbor.

Jesus said it different ways: these are the two greatest commandments: love God and neighbor.

And ‘inasmuch as you have done it for one of these in my family, you have done it to me.’¹

What can we offer in love to our neighbor?

The need is so large that it will require the emergency services of the affected regions, cooperation among neighboring states, and the resources of our federal government.

Churches, Synagogues, and Mosques will be partners in this response as will civic organizations.

Our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has already mobilized to be a partner in the response with the gifts that you gave last spring during the season of Lent. Your gifts are now being spent to bring help to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Joan has told you about our first response: financial gifts. These will be vitally important.

But Jesus’ life guides us further.

If we read the story of Jesus’ life standing by the door, we know that we are to follow Jesus into a hurting world.

After we have given our dollars to help, we go through the door with muscle, special skills, and with the hope of our faith.

During my wife and my visit to Malawi, Africa, I was surprised to see that one missionary was a retired accountant who was helping to put a mission site back on sound financial grounds.

While we cannot explain why hurricanes happen, we can say is that God has shown us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, that God walks and works in the midst of human suffering.

That presence of God is not only a spiritual awareness; God’s presence is mediated in the generosity of donors and in the compassion of helpers.

¹ Matthew 25:40

And God's presence is made tangible through our hope. In Jesus Christ, God has promised that, in the end, suffering and death do not win.

Love wins. God's resurrection life wins. And so we are people who persevere.

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Friends, the need of our Gulf Coast sisters and brothers is great.

Pray for the cooperation and effective response of various government and civic agencies.

Pray for people you do not know who will awake today exhausted from yesterday's unfinished work.

Pray for God's guidance that we may respond in every way possible.

We have much to share that is sorely needed: money, muscle and the hope of our faith.

The first winds blew a rain of destruction and death.

Now the Spirit of God is blowing love for neighbor bringing help and hope.

Our God lifts up those who are brought low. And the Spirit works through the people of God to provide material, means and hope.

In the Gulf Coast, we see clearly what is always before us – God calling us to see the need of our neighbor and to love them with our time, talents and treasures.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we
gather to be washed at the font,
eat for strength at the table and
leave our sanctuary to love our neighbor.

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