

The Debt of Love
Sermon on Romans 13:8-10 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, September 4, 2005

What is to be said this morning in the face of incredible natural disaster and unprecedented national calamity? What words are sufficient to express our inexplicable sadness at the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, or our grief over the incalculable toll in human lives exacted by this storm, or our anger toward the miserably slow and almost incompetent response of government agencies to the plight of tens of thousands mostly poor and black residents of coastal Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama?

I have watched the television coverage of this human tragedy and variously felt helpless, frustrated, overwhelmed, horrified, bewildered, and angry. As I have watched reel after reel of video footage of submerged homes and businesses or people stranded on highway overpasses or mothers pleading for help for sick or missing loved ones, I cannot help but remember how I felt on September 11, 2001. I was serving the Methodist Church in Great Britain on the Isle of Wight, thousands of miles from home. My telephone rang, and the caller asked whether I was watching the news. Since it was early afternoon, I replied that in fact I was not and wondered why on earth I should be watching television in the middle of the day. The caller explained that a plane had been flown into the one of the towers of the World Trade Center, and that I needed to watch. I could only watch, aghast and uncomprehending, as over and over the BBC broadcast pictures too horrific to be believed. How can this be happening? I wondered. Surely this cannot be real.

And that is what I have felt again and again this week. How can this be happening? Surely this cannot be real. Like September 11th, Hurricane Katrina is a nightmare, but unlike the phantasms that haunt our dreams, it is only too real. What is to be said in the face of this

disaster? What words can express the inexpressible? And what words does God speak to us? As a king once asked the prophet Jeremiah, “Is there a word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:17).

When our own words fail, we have the words of scripture to speak that which we cannot bring to speech. And so our cry may be that of the Psalmist who writes in Psalm 69:

Save me, O God, / for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; / I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. / My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God. (vv. 1-3)

[A]s for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. /
At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.
With your faithful help rescue me from sinking in the mire; /
let me be delivered ... from the deep waters.
Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up,
or the Pit close its mouth over me. (vv. 13-15)

This psalm, and so many others, allows us to express a range of desires and feelings. What the psalmist wants most is salvation, to be rescued from the waters of the rising flood. And in that plea for deliverance we hear the psalmist’s fear as the waters rise while the writer sinks. We hear the psalmist’s despair at the deep waters and raging flood. We hear the psalmist grow tired—tired of crying and tired of waiting. We hear the psalmist’s frustration as his cry goes up to God, only to be met with seeming silence.

And yet such is the psalmist’s faith that his prayers continually ascend to the God who promises salvation. Such is the psalmist’s faith that he is willing to trust in and wait for God’s “acceptable time.” The psalmist can have such faith in God’s power to deliver because he knows that God’s steadfast love is abundant, that it is both God’s power and God’s will to save those who call on the name of the Lord. God’s faithful help will not abandon God’s people to sink in the mire, be submerged in deep waters, or be swallowed by the flood. God will save.

And yet in times when God seems silent, when we strain to hear even a whisper from the Lord, it is easy to lose faith. Fear—that we are abandoned, that God has forgotten or forsaken us—that fear grips us and holds us tight. That fear compels us to do what we otherwise would not do. And so we witness desperate men and women smashing shop windows, taking what food and supplies they can. We hear reports of rapes and other atrocities in convention centers and public facilities. We receive word of bodies floating in the water or lying in the streets or left on chairs by the side of the road. And we cannot imagine our inhumanity toward one another.

Where is the government?, we ask. Where are the authorities? Well we ask those questions, for St. Paul, writing in the Letter to the Romans, says the governmental authority is “God’s servant for your good” (Rom. 13:4a). That authority, empowered as it is to serve the public’s good, has been noticeably absent, especially in New Orleans. As a consequence, looting and lawlessness and mayhem and violence have broken out. Only with the recent arrival of the National Guard and other armed forces has a measure of order been restored.

In the meantime, an unknown number of lives have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of people are displaced from homes to which they cannot return and are now housed in sports stadiums, in airports, in public schools, and in churches. These people—each an individual person loved by God, each with a harrowing tale of destruction and escape—now stand in need. They need life’s basic necessities: water, food, shelter from the elements, a safe place to lay their heads at night. And beyond the basic necessities they need hope and reassurance and a sense that they are not alone as they face the arduous task of rebuilding homes and lives and families.

It would be easy to think that this is indeed a terrible tragedy and to respond with charity. It would be easy to think that we can do no more than send money or donate food, clothing, and supplies. It would be easy to think that we owe these people nothing and so having given money

and sent health kits, we have done enough, our duty is met. It would be easy to think that, but it would be wrong.

“Owe no one anything,” says St. Paul, “except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). As much as you or I might want to retreat to the safety and comfort of our living rooms to watch the drama of human misery unfold on our TVs, we cannot do so. We cannot do so for conscience’s sake or for the sake of the gospel. “The commandments ... are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (13:9). We cannot retreat because our neighbors are in need, and Jesus commands us to love our neighbors. Adolf Schlatter put it this way: “We live in relationships that obligate us mutually and that afford others a claim on us; ... our life together results in claims that we are required to fulfill.”¹ Now our neighbors are making a claim on us. We owe them nothing except the debt of love.

And so let our payment of that debt be generous. Let us each pray without ceasing, commending our brothers and sisters to the grace and mercy of God. Let us pray that the waters will subside and that order will be restored and that people will be allowed to return to rebuild their lives. Let us each give money sacrificially, to the extent that we are able. Let us give to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Red Cross, and other agencies who will provide relief so long as the need exists. Let us each share our time lavishly, never tiring in the work of the Lord. Let us go to Reunion Arena or to Texas Stadium to feed the hungry, to load supplies, or simply to speak a word of comfort. Let us each open our homes to the homeless stranger as God leads us. Let us each make room in our lives for those who come among us needing compassion and kindness and care. Let us each pay the debt of love of neighbor.

¹ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzman (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995) 244.