

Gathered in Love  
Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18: 15-20  
September 4, 2005, Dr. June C. Goudey

Romans 13:8-10

13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

13:9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Matthew 18:15-20

18:15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

18:16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

18:17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

18:18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

18:19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

18:20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Depending upon your point of observation, the world looks different. When I was 7 years old, I loved hurricanes...no- school announcements were greeted with joy by my 5-year old brother and me. We felt safe, even though the world outside was under siege. To a child, flying shingles are exciting to watch as long as you aren't outside trying to duck for your life as they furiously fly by. Fifty-two years and many hurricanes later, I know better. Hurricane winds are no laughing matter.

Perspective is everything. How you look at the world effects how you experience it. Today's Scripture calls us to look with the eyes of faith. All of the commandments, Paul says in Romans, all of them... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love is the fulfilling of the law according to Paul, because Love does no wrong to a neighbor.

In March 2004, one commentator wrote: We're not accustomed to a theological reading of a presidency. Yet it's evident, as Bill Keller of the New York Times wrote last year, that Bush's faith is "the animating force of his presidency." What hasn't been recognized is that neighbor-love in particular is what moves Bush and has helped shape his presidency. His faith teaches him to "love thy neighbor as thyself," and he approaches his job with that imperative in mind." This week, in Alabama, the president once again called Americans to love their neighbor. His context, as we all know, was his tour of the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Years from now Hurricane Katrina will be remembered by many as the week from hell. For those in its midst it still is.

**News flash**, Monday, August 29th: New Orleans has apparently dodged a bullet; Hurricane Katrina has passed the city by.

**News Flash**, Tuesday. The city's levees have given way...80 % of New Orleans is under water... Thousands of people, sheltered in the superdome and the convention center are without electricity, no lights, no air-conditioning, no sanitation, no water, no safety .....In a matter of hours, the news grows dimmer, the situation more demanding, the people more desperate

**News flash:** No one knows how many were killed by Hurricane Katrina's floods and how many more succumbed waiting to be rescued. But the bodies are everywhere: hidden in attics, floating among the ruined city, crumpled on wheelchairs, abandoned on highways. It's one thing to fly over such devastation, as the President did mid-week, it's another thing entirely to be stranded in the middle of chaos. Unable to get perspective, unable to get enough distance from the presence of crying babies, hungry children, frightened and frail adults, and the omni present dead, it didn't take long this week for the face of humanity to become distorted by looting, shooting, brutality and rape. One man in the midst of this horror put it simply: "People are just not themselves." Who would be?

This has been a week of mounting shame and blame, another opportunity for Michael Moore, in an open letter to the President making its rounds on the Internet, to shine a light on George Bush's disconnection from reality... another opportunity to compare George W with George H; Hurricane Andrew with Hurricane Katrina; To compare New Orleans in September 2005 with New York in September 2001. But let's be clear, comparisons will get us nowhere. The same is true for any attempt to compare Republican responses with those of Democrats. The heart of this tragedy is not about politics its about privilege.

What possessed these crazy people to stay in their homes? Why didn't they leave the city when they were told to do so? You know the answer as well as I do...the answers lie not in what possessed them but what they didn't possess... the money to buy gas for non-existent cars...the ability to get out of their wheelchairs and walk away...the ability to leave their elderly parents or grandparents. It's not that these people lacked the will to seek safety for themselves and their loved ones...they lacked the basic infrastructure of safety to help them make the choices they needed to make.

Communities build levees for protection. People do too. In the external world, Levees are artificial embankments located along a watercourse or an arm of the sea, for the purpose of protecting the land from

flooding. In the internal worlds you and I unconsciously create for ourselves to weather the storm forces of life, levees are unconscious barriers of protection periodically reinforced by sandbags of fear. To survive in this world all of us need to possess a sense of safety and selfhood. We need to know that no matter what situation confronts us, we have the capacity to maintain a sense of well-being.

*Eugene Peterson's* observation is a keen one. "All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets within us." Poverty and privilege are divergent points on the spectrum of human experience. Even so, the observation, "People are just not themselves" applies. You can be a victim on the ground, wading through contaminated water dotted with bloated bodies and, without thinking, find yourself in a situation where you are not yourself

You can be the President of the United States flying over a devastated landscape removed from the physical realities of Katrina's destructive power and the destructive forces of poverty and, without thinking, find yourself in a situation where you are not yourself.

In the midst of being briefed on the unfolding aftermath of Katrina the President said "The good news is -- and it's hard for some to see it now -- that out of this chaos is going to come a fantastic Gulf Coast, like it was before. Out of the rubbles of Trent Lott's house -- he's lost his entire house -- there's going to be a fantastic house. And I'm looking forward to sitting on the porch."

Some, seeing no incongruity at all, joined the President as he laughed out loud. Others like me wondered at the inappropriateness of lifting up Senator Lott's situation, the very Senator who lost his privileged position as majority leader of the Senate because, in recalling the presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond, he seemed to sanction Thurmond's segregationist policies. The same Strom Thurmond, who, it was later revealed, had sired a daughter in 1925 with a black house servant. The contrast between Trent Lott's porch and the attics that entombed the poor of New Orleans be their skin black or white or various shades thereof is sobering in the extreme.

No matter where we stand, in the center of privilege, or on the edge of precariousness, people like you and me, are in danger of not being ourselves. Labor Day weekend is an appropriate time to reflect on the nature of classism, for at the heart of the labor movement that took hold in this country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lays the same incongruity that shadows the undoing of New Orleans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People are not themselves and not just in New Orleans. We have divided ourselves every which way we can: in religion...in politics...in race...in sexuality and gender. But none of these are more insidious than the dividing lines of class.

The reclamation of New Orleans that lies ahead is nothing in comparison to the reclaiming of our national soul that confronts every one of us and will to our dying day. Loving one's neighbor involves more than lending a hand in a time of crisis; loving one's neighbor involves concrete acts of love every waking day. Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement spent her life in the service of Jesus and took to heart Dostoevsky's words in *The Brother's Karamazov*: "Active love unlike love in dreams requires labor and fortitude..." Active love is not for the fainthearted nor is it the sole domain of Christians. Active love in the words of Paul does no harm. Active love in the words of ethicist, Beverly Harrison, recreates well-being, for love is always the "power to act one another into well-being."

Today as we gather at this table, in Jesus' name, we gather not to polish a memory of Jesus' death but to create a force-field of loving energy so powerful that the love of Jesus brings us to ourselves. To be ourselves is to be people without division. To be ourselves is to see the world not in terms of political or religious persuasion, but to see the world through the eyes of God, one people indivisible with wealth and well-being for all. Jesus called it abundant life and he offered it to all. Here at this table he offers it still. One sermon on class is not the answer to this week's tragedy, but as long as we gather in Jesus' name and invoke his presence one sermon is a beginning... the ending is up to all of us. So let's get on with it!