

Trying to Make Sense of Things

May 14, 2006

So, after a dinner with all three of our daughters on Easter Sunday, Linda and I headed to Manchester for the night. Our flight was at 6:00 AM Monday morning. We saved an hour and a half car ride before dawn, but probably didn't get any better sleep in the motel than if we had stayed at home. By noon, after a stop in Cleveland, we had landed in New Orleans, had lunch and were heading by taxi to Little Farms UCC, where we would spend the week.

The other seven people, all from Maine, had arrived on Easter day. They had toured the area for close to 4 hours that afternoon and were now at work at three different locations. I don't think anyone figured we would be in New Orleans in time to help out, but by 2:00 PM we were at one of the sights. Three people had spent the morning carting out of a woman's house whatever furniture and possessions remained. They were now in the process of taking down the damaged sheetrock. It was uncomfortably hot and John Small, the volunteer coordinator who had driven us to the house, figured they would be ready to quit...it being Monday and Mainiacs not used to the 90 degree heat. However, the crew was prepared to continue, and although John invited us to drive away with him, we felt a bit guilty about departing. So Linda and I donned our paper coveralls, face mask and gloves and began to pitch in.

I am guessing that the other workers decided we could make up for lost time by tackling the kitchen. It's an eerie feeling emptying everything that you normally see in a kitchen into wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow and dumping it by the curb outside for city trucks to haul away. We were supposed to save anything that looked useable. Since water had submerged most everything, there wasn't much. It was depressing work, that hour or more we spent pawing through a woman's kitchen treasures. How would you have felt, pulling containers out of cupboards, some still filled with water from the hurricane 8 months earlier, watching cockroaches scamper underfoot and determining most everything a total loss?

We spent all week at this woman's house, never meeting her or learning much about her. After the initial shock of feeling as if we were intruding, violating a person's sacred space, we went about our work with a certain detachment. Everything was to go, right down to the studs and sub-flooring. Nail heads would even be pulled, so that another crew could come in after us and try to rid the studs of the nasty, ever-present black mold that extended upwards 6 to 8 feet or sometimes even higher.

What we did learn about this woman was that she was elderly. The United Church of Christ had made arrangements with her to do this work. They are careful to do work for residents who cannot afford to pay the cost charged by for-profit outfits. So she had been screened, as carefully as you can screen someone who has lived out of state since the hurricane. Ironically, she had made one request - that we mow her lawn. Not that there was much lawn. A bit out front on each side of the walk and probably more out back. The back, however, was a sea of belongings thrown out of the residence aside of hers. One of the women in our group was appalled by this strange request. She was quite put out! She thought it presumptuous, wondering why anyone would expect people to mow their lawn when there were other, much more pressing matters.

It did seem pretty preposterous considering the overall devastation, but for me it was my first glimpse of determination and of hope. It's hard to strip the house of someone you won't ever meet. You don't know if that person cares about the house or whether she is taking advantage of free labor. But to want her lawn mowed? That was a sign that she truly loved her home and intended to return. And to make perhaps a statement to others about the future! You drive around the city, some sections lying in waste as far as you can see. Still no water or electricity; piles of rubble in front of house as far as you can see! Then you see a sign on a lawn or a house painted with bold lettering - "We will return." You occasionally see the FEMA trailers in front of a house, people trying to get their lives back on track. Amid the shrubs, bushes and even trees that have turned brown from the flooding, but flowers have been planted. Plants setting off a walkway or by the side of a flattened home. "I am coming home. We will rebuild. We are New Orleans"

The scripture this morning tells of an Ethiopian Eunuch who is reading from Isaiah, unable to comprehend what the story is really all about. Philip, apparently sensing how dumbfounded the Eunuch is, asks “Do you understand what you are reading?” “How can I unless someone guides me,” is the reply. Well, New Orleans is like that – an arduous journey through the streets and all you have to go by, for the most part, is what you see. It is so hard to comprehend. No map to make sense of the desolation and what it will lead to. So you need a guide to interpret. You need a voice to explain that all is not defeated or dead. The Theologian Walter Brueggemann raises the question of how one can see God in the midst of a disaster of this proportion. Unless you have a guide to explain how God “prevails over chaos in order to sustain life and keep it safe,” you remain clueless.

The woman we never met was our first such guide. Knowing that she was not beaten by the weight of such tremendous loss spoke to me. We eventually learned from her neighbor, a man that had lived next to her for 20 years, that she was in her 80’s and had preceded him on the street. Her daughter lived in the apartment next to her - in this Double Shotgun House, basically what we would call a duplex. He told us of the neighborhood – of shootings and robberies, not a place many of us would want to call home. But she saw herself returning!

I assume the woman was religious. An inexpensive cloth wall hanging of the Last Supper we saved for her. A couple of religious pictures in frames sat in the pile we put aside – a pile that would have fit upon our altar. Not much was spared! We know she was poor and taken advantage of by others. We found a contract for work done on her home, spraying to rid the home of pests. She couldn’t afford to pay the total cost so she paid monthly, a 19% interest rate charged her. Poverty is not always how little you possess, but how others unjustly take advantage of you.

We really didn’t see that much traffic along her street. People would drive by and stare or wave or sometimes stop to talk. Scavengers were trying to make money. One morning a man came and picked out certain metal matter from the pile we had made along the curb. Another day a man came and took the air conditioner from her house. We didn’t stop him; in fact we helped him. Both would make a bit of money through salvage. Let me ask again, how would it feel to have someone just walk into your home and take away what they might be able to sell?

On Tuesday afternoon we thought that we heard an ice cream truck in the distance. It was 93 degrees and humid and the thought of ice cream was pretty attractive to us. Delirium had set in? On Wednesday we heard the truck again. I looked far up the street and saw it turning. I decided to cut it off. But alas, it took me too long to find my glasses, which I had set aside because they became so fogged up. I ran several blocks, sweating even more, but the truck escaped me, and I returned to the house to the dejected looks of our crew. On Thursday, however, the ice cream truck for some miraculous reason came down our street. A woman (the ice cream lady we named her) made a good profit on us, especially from the generous tip she was given to have her picture taken. She said the television station wanted to film her, but she was too shy and had to stay in the truck because of breathing problems.

This woman too became a guide to the city. Sure, the French Quarter is coming back. We saw that on Friday night. There is money to be made there. And the business and garden districts are more financially equipped to get back on their feet. But the city of New Orleans will ultimately arise as people reach out in the neighborhoods that sit on the edge. The fringe people. The vulnerable and the poor. This is where the church and other volunteer groups have gone. Rebuilding as we were doing, in areas where only faith dares to see beyond the ruin. Where others fear to tread until the day when there is money to be made. I was happy and delighted to see the ice cream lady. An angel of hope.

I came away especially proud of our church – the United Church of Christ – as I have seldom been. In that short week, we met two other church groups – one of 25 from Massachusetts, and one of 30 from California. The group from California was scheduled to work someplace else, but decided that they were

needed more in Katrina's wake. They were gutting a large house and working at a feeding station. The group from Mass was working to rebuild the Good Shepherd UCC church that was damaged by the flooding. On our last Saturday, our work week over, they were still sheet rocking and sanding and doing electrical work so other groups could follow. We met two volunteer couples from Ohio and Indiana who were there for 6 months and 6 weeks respectively to give guidance to the volunteer work groups. In the truck one day I asked Jim (the 6 month volunteer from Ohio) if he thought this work necessary. All he said was "It has to begin somewhere." That "it has to be done before anything else." The volunteers were our guides, living out the mandate to be with those who were in pain. Yes, I was very proud of the UCC.

In an editorial in the Christian Century magazine from last October, I read: "Some words must be spoken on behalf of those whose lives have been turned upside down and who have lost any sense of security or normalcy, and especially on behalf of those who never made it out of the storm...Katrina exposed the ugly underbelly of poverty and racism in the United States. Close to 30 percent of the people in New Orleans lived below the poverty line, and when disaster struck, it was, as usual, the people farthest from the center of power and wealth who bore the brunt of it. Job complained, 'From the city, the dying groan. And the throat of the wounded cries for help.' Who will answer their cries this time around?"

As strange as it was to strip a person's house of everything, even the hardwood floor, we left there on Friday feeling the place looked pretty darn good. That what we had done had merit and meaning! That the house was ready to be cleansed and then another crew might one day attach new sheetrock. Of course, we have no idea whether the house will one day be torn down! If the woman can afford repair costs or if a developer will buy everything up or new laws will dictate that it become marshland. But we did what we could and we were certain that the owner would, at the very least, gain satisfaction from knowing someone had worked on her home. We had been told that the very people who had lost everything were profuse in their praise of those who came to help. Indeed we had met people who said in gratitude, "We are blessed you are here." I think we felt blessed to have been of some small help in their effort to recover from the storm. In solidarity with the helpless, we were the ones who really were most blessed.

On Saturday morning we sat around after our final group breakfast – the nine of us from Maine – and we took time to reflect. What I will remember most is one group member, who we all found a bit contentious. He could be short tempered, even nasty. He objected to the tasty, spicy foods being served, preferring hamburgers and fries. He was determined to pull nails from wood at the curb even though it wasn't necessary. He hadn't yet said anything at the closing, so I asked what he was thinking. He sat at the table next to a list, two columns long of New Orleans residents who the United Church of Christ had arranged to help in the weeks to come. We had been house #46; there were at least that many more signed up. He simply held up the list. His eyes welled up with tears. And he said "This is why we come. These people – this is why we are here."

If there had been any question of what it was all about... If we had not been able to make sense of the week before now...It became clear through the eyes of another guide...one of our own...that hope is all about the way in which we stand in solidarity with those swept aside by the storms of life. By the church's presence, the good news is delivered – that all people are deserving of God's love.