

Many Hands
9/4/05

With a rambunctious Senior High youth group, I traveled to Back Bay Mission in Biloxi Mississippi in 1985. It was my first major effort at organizing a work camp. Why we selected Mississippi (the ends of the earth, so to speak) when we lived in New Hampshire remains a mystery to this day. However, the trip was well worth the effort. People predicted that we would fail to recruit youth who preferred to work summer jobs or be at the beach. We ended up with 9 or 10 youth, it's a bit hazy in retrospect, and 4 committed adult chaperones. It was such a good trip that I doubt one of those youth, with news of the devastation in Biloxi this week, did not fondly and prayerfully recall the week spent in Mississippi.

Back then we were given a relatively small glimpse of poverty. Back Bay Mission was then and is remains today an agency of the United Church of Christ that ministers to a clientele of low income and poverty level individuals. While we were there, we participated in the typical work week – painting a home for an elderly couple that had neither the physical nor monetary ability to do so themselves. Evening programs were structured around discussions of poverty and its tenacious grip upon the local population. Back at the mission, we observed a steady stream of visitors coming for help, counsel and assistance. But again, it was just a glimpse of poverty in those pre-casino days of 1985.

On Wednesday, we had the afternoon and evening to do what we wanted. Can you guess what the kids chose? We rode into New Orleans where, except for a tour of the Superdome, we set them free to roam the city. Jackson Square, Bourbon Street, Beignets at the Café du Monde. Even on a hot and heavy day in August, New Orleans was alive with music and good food; a joyous spirit announced our presence as it does everyone. It was a unique blend of culture. Many of you have probably been there and enjoyed its pleasures too.

So many have reminisced in the last week about New Orleans and the surrounding area. What once was and is no more. As Bob Ryan (sportswriter in the Boston Globe wrote of his favorite American City, “New Orleans was – and I fear it’s quite operative to use the past tense – unlike any other major American City, and it is very difficult to explain the difference to someone who has never been there... New Orleans is now an uninhabitable city, and there is no guarantee it can ever be restored to a livable standard or, indeed, if it should be. And it cannot ever be exactly what it was.” The sense of hopelessness and despair seems to cloud the sky for all those who remember the Big Easy and its carefree pleasures.

After seeing the graphic images on television, I guess one has to wonder if New Orleans should return to the way it was! While the city’s massive destruction is a horrific scene on par with what an atomic bomb or a Tsunami might inflict and the slow relief effort is deplorable, bogged down for some reason, whether it be shock or unpreparedness, that has not been the worst of it.

No, my hunch, my inclination, is to say that, in spite of all this, what most people throughout the world are struck by is the tremendous poverty that has been revealed in the wake of the Katrina. We have heard for years how the inner cities have been

abandoned; that poverty has been allowed to flourish; that crime and drugs have run rampant. What we have seen in the last few days has been an embarrassment, because it has revealed to us the so called “hidden” poverty that exists in this prosperous land of plenty.

The images of people trapped in the Superdome and the Convention Center or on rooftops waiting for rescue are those of many people without transportation out of the city. Many of them plundered, not just for lack of food, but for suitcases - to carry what possessions they had or could find to relief areas. We all undoubtedly knew that new Orleans, like any city or community anywhere, has its Bourbon Street as well as its Poverty Row, but it's as if the waters have swept aside the coverings, granting us a view we did not have before, and as the waters recede it will only become worse.

Ironically, I chose a strange occasion to call upon a church to recognize the poor in our community. It was the 150th Anniversary of the West Lebanon Congregational Church. We had led up to a gala weekend with events throughout the year recalling major events in the life of the church. The weekend involved a major banquet and dance at the Elks Club. Carole Carlson, Conference Minister, joined us on Sunday. Oddly, the Diaconate had defied me – in spite of my protests they wanted Carole to share Conference greetings and offer prayer. They wanted me to give the sermon.

So, to make it brief, I chose to challenge the church to do a better job of reaching out into the community and helping the poor. If the church was going to be around for another 150 years, it had to wrestle seriously with its calling to care for the poor. To me this is the teaching of Jesus that continues to exert its influence over us. It is also the teaching that, which when we lose sight of it, we fail to be the church that can truly call itself Christian. Most people spoke favorably to me after the service. Some, of course, didn't let on their thoughts one way or another. Two pretty much said the same thing: “Was today really the time to talk about poverty? I thought we came here to celebrate!”

I am not a prophet. I will leave that to Jesus. He, as was read in today's scripture, calls us to love one another unconditionally. “The poor you will always have with you.” A sad and telling remark! Quite amazing that we find it in the New Testament. For years, its meaning has been debated. Whatever, it's a sad truism that was shamefully revealed once again this week.

The time is ripe, or should I say the time is at hand; it sounds so much more Biblical - to act as the church that is called to respond to the needs of the world. Some simple suggestions for us:

1. Continue to support the poor and disadvantaged in ways that we are good at and that help. The food and monetary donations you bring in for the Wakefield Food Pantry help sustain lives. Keep up the good work of regularly donating. Several from this church volunteer at the Food Pantry or take food there. I know Dave and Ginny Schweitzer would gladly provide more information or help you to get involved. Living near Portland, there are more services for the needy. Working at the Teen Center serving food on Fridays, we have become aware of particular food items the youth would like and are lacking. I plan to put an insert in next week's bulletin so you and our

children, in particular, can reach out in another context, by bringing in items that can be served at the Center.

2. A week ago Friday we went to the great Acton Fair with a friend. Can you guess what the first booth we passed was? Habitat for Humanity in York County Maine. I know there are many New Hampshire affiliates that you can join, but even then I took this encounter as a sign. The York Group is currently working on a house in Biddeford Maine, which of course is just south of where I live. They did a nice job of telling me and Linda that we had skills adequate to volunteer! However, I am passing this on to you because they intend to construct two houses next year in Shapleigh Maine, right over the border from here. Habitat builds homes for those who cannot afford to on their own. I would urge you to keep informed and to volunteer.
3. I would also encourage each of us to make an immediate financial donation through a reputable charity of your choice. Be it the Red Cross, Salvation Army, the United Church of Christ or one of the many others. The United Church of Christ has called for a million dollar fund raising goal. I would also suggest that the church take a special offering in the near future to support the work of Back Bay Mission as it regains its footing. As their director writes, "The challenge of service and ministry in this new context is quite unfathomable now." But as days turn to weeks, our assistance to this esteemed Mission will be required. How gratifying it will be to know that our hands are alive through the ongoing ministry of this church!
4. Finally, what we can all do is pray. I posted the prayer of John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ May his words bind us in fellowship. No longer are the poor invisible to our eyes. They are our brothers and sisters crying out for help. In the name of Jesus, our Emmanuel, we must pray in order to remain in communion with them.

Let me close with words I might add to the song written by Phil Ochs about the laborers of this country:

We've seen the hands of the newly homeless, people like you and me;
Hands grasping for food, clutching at air,
Hands no longer working, jobs lost to storm.
Katrina left them homeless, hopeless as well.
The hands of the homeless are reaching out to you.

Hands, many hands, reaching out to us! It is sad, a desperate tale. But remember the Good News – we are many hands and Christ is at our center. "Love one another as I have loved you." Amen