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Today I was planning on continuing my series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and preaching about living free from contempt and anger (Matthew 5:21-26). However, I feel compelled to talk about the national tragedy that has been unfolding before our eyes. Understandably, the events of this week in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have elicited anger in many people for many reasons. We have seen the pictures and heard the interviews and cries of desperate, angry, fellow citizens as they were surrounded by death and destruction and the loss of hope. Overwhelmed by the images on our screens and feeling helpless to do anything about the suffering, people have asked "Why?" many times.

Why was the speed and scope of the response to the hurricane and to the flooding so inadequate when this scenario has been predicted and dreaded for years?

Why are people shooting at rescue workers, police, and medical personnel?

Why are reporters and news crews able to get to places, but no one has gotten to those same places and people with supplies?

Why was the urgency of the situation not grasped more quickly at the highest levels?

Some have asked *why* so many people chose not to evacuate, but 100,000 people in New Orleans didn't own a vehicle so evacuating was not really even an option, to say nothing of the folks in hospitals.

We are facing a national crisis on our own soil the impact of which is hard to estimate. It is quite possible that the last time there were so many displaced, homeless, people in the United States was at the height of the Great Depression in the 1930's or in the 1860's at the end of the Civil War.

The scripture that came to mind for me in expressing what the Lord would want God's people to do in the face of this crisis is Isaiah 58:7-10a, 12 where the Lord says, *"I want you to share your food with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. If you do these things, your salvation will come like the dawn. Yes, your healing will come quickly. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the Lord will answer, 'Yes, I am here,' he will quickly reply. Stop oppressing the helpless and stop making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Your children*

will rebuild the deserted ruins. Then you will be known as the people who rebuild their walls and cities.”¹

The months and years to come will likely show that this event will have an incredibly profound impact on our nation in a host of ways and obviously upon the lives of millions of people in the Gulf Coast for whom life will never be the same again. There is anger because there was a training exercise just last year for such a storm and yet the response has been so poor and people have died unnecessarily. While a flood of people wants to assign blame, the level of this disaster is so extensive because of a whole host of complex contributing factors in addition to the size and strength of the hurricane and the failures of leadership that occurred.

For example, our nation is vulnerable to hurricanes because such a large percentage of our population lives on the coast and so close to the water. In Brewster, old sea captains who knew the power of wind and waves from months and years at sea built their homes a good half mile inland behind marshes and wetlands. Wetlands and marshes are nature’s sponge for absorbing and mitigating the flooding from storms like Katrina yet for decades wetlands more than the size of the state of Rhode Island have been filled in and developed along the Gulf Coast while houses, businesses and casinos were piled right along the water’s edge. Money for the levees around New Orleans was cut as local and national politicians lacked the political will or foresight to do what was necessary to protect a city of almost half a million people. Meanwhile a bridge to an uninhabited island in Alaska just received millions of dollars in the recent transportation bill. This is scandalous. Citizens in Louisiana, like those in Massachusetts, probably would have responded negatively to taxes that would have funded better protection. As Brewster author John Hay observed, *“Short term profit has poor eyes to see with.”²*

Now the cost of rebuilding will be far greater, although the wisdom of rebuilding a city shaped like a bowl surrounded by water should be questioned, even though those who mention that possibility will be harshly criticized. However the whole area that is flooded is contaminated and compromised and the nation could invest billions and such a storm could happen again. Yet New Orleans is also a city of historical and cultural significance and one of the most important ports in our nation so this catastrophe will dramatically hurt the middle of the country and both coasts will feel it as well. Five of the

¹ *New Living Translation*

² John Hay, In The Company of Light, page 54

twelve largest ports in the country are in Louisiana. The ripple effect will be felt on the cost of goods like coffee, bananas, tuna, plywood, and all kinds of building materials.

Disasters such as this inevitably fall hardest on the poor, the elderly and the ill, the majority of whom in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mississippi are African-American, who didn't have the ability to flee, didn't have the finances to afford generators, and don't have insurance. Somewhere between 23-28% of the population of New Orleans was living below the poverty level before Katrina hit. I fear the death toll will rise into the thousands. Some people have been angered by the pictures of looters, although any of us can understand the need to get food, drinks, and supplies that can relieve suffering. The folks carrying off TV's with nowhere to go, no power to turn them on, and their very lives at risk reflect the despair, hopelessness, and the poverty of many in our country. While the pictures of looters at a Walgreen's or Wal-Mart may elicit anger, one could also make the argument that the worst looters of all in the wake of this disaster are the oil companies, which are among the wealthiest and most prosperous businesses on the planet. According to one newspaper article, "Of the world's seven most profitable corporations, four are ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, BP, and Chevron. ExxonMobil is the world's most profitable company, making \$25.3 billion last year. Exxon Mobil and the other three corporations had combined profits last year of \$72.8 billion."³ How have they responded to the crisis? ExxonMobil pledged a measly \$2 million dollars or only \$1 million more than George Steinbrenner's New York Yankees.

I would give anything to hear the CEO of one of the major oil companies call a press conference to announce that, "Oil rigs, platforms, pipelines and supply routes have been disrupted, production in the Gulf has been impacted, this is a difficult situation for our industry and our nation. While we have an obligation to our stockholders, we hold an even greater obligation to our fellow citizens who have made us so successful. This is not the time to be concerned with maximizing profits, it is a time to maximize caring for the American people so that needs can be met to help those most impacted by this disaster and so that our nation can move forward. Therefore we are freezing gas prices for a period of time in order to help with our nation's economic and emotional recovery." Wouldn't you love to hear that? And the irony is if one of those CEO's had the guts and vision to make such a statement, in long run their company would make even more profit because everyone would want to buy their oil and gas!

³ The Boston Globe, 9/2/2005, Big oil's bigtime looting, by Derrick Jackson.

This is a time in our nation's history when strong, creative, visionary leadership is desperately needed at every level of our society from religious organizations, the government, and from business. We are facing a situation where there will be hundreds of thousands of Americans who need to begin life over because they have nothing – no home, no job, no money, no possessions, no where to go. The symbol for crisis in Chinese is the combination of danger and opportunity and this is what we face, a national crisis that includes both danger and opportunity.

The danger is that such a time as this will bring out the worst in human nature from price gouging and violence, to apathy and selfishness and incompetent leadership. However, this is also a moment of great opportunity for the churches of the United States to demonstrate the love of God. If I had the power to make it happen, I would encourage the churches of the United States to engage in a refugee resettlement program similar to the one that took shape after World War II to help the displaced people of Europe find a new start. I called Dr. Walter Parrish the Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of the South. Our denomination has very few churches in the south however there are several churches affiliated with the American Baptists in Louisiana and Alabama. I left a message with Dr. Parrish's assistant saying we would very much like to partner with one of these churches to help in any way that we can. The leaders of the ABCUSA are meeting Tuesday in Pennsylvania to coordinate our short term and long term response.

On Friday I spoke with Pastor Julius Scruggs at the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, they are gathering goods to send to those most in need and said he would call me back after the National Baptist Convention next weekend. He said their convention would be issuing a declaration and the Executive Committee would be talking with the church leaders from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama about how to organize a response. They were also asking all their churches to receive an offering over the next three weeks to help with the needs.

I called and spoke with a man at ShareYourHome.org a non profit in Louisiana that some creative IT and business folks pulled together in a matter of days to try and link up folks who need a place to stay with folks who can take people in. I asked if he thought people would be willing to come as far north as Massachusetts. He replied in his Louisiana drawl, *"Well, these folks are Southerners. One lady who called said she had an aunt up north near a lake, but she said, "It's just too cold, I can't take it up there, that's why I live in the south."* I laughed and said, *"That's why I live in the north; I can't*

stand the heat.” They are trying to keep people in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama where they know the climate, the culture, and are closer to family. He thanked me for our concern and prayers and I commended him for what they are doing. Pastor Kevin called his friend Kurt who works for World Relief and they also mentioned they are trying to keep folks in the south.

Even though we are far from the front lines of this crisis, we can still help in a variety of ways. We can pray for everyone involved – the victims, the dispossessed, the sick, the grieving, those who have been left with nothing. We can pray for those in leadership in government, business, relief agencies and religious organizations who need wisdom, insight, and vision. We can pray for the quiet anonymous people who are the heart and backbone of our country – good neighbors, volunteers, the terrific men and women of the Coast Guard who rescued so many people, nurses, doctors, national guard personnel, firefighters, police officers, church members, rescue workers, ordinary citizens who are working to the point of exhaustion doing whatever is in their power to do to save lives and improve people’s situations.

In addition to prayer we will respond in other ways. We can contribute financially, we don’t have resources as great as ExxonMobil, but we can respond with proportionally greater generosity. We may be able to help re-settle some families either bringing them to the Cape or helping churches down south financially who are doing so. In the months to come when the time is right and the need is there, we will certainly send volunteer workers to help with rebuilding as we done in Puerto Rico and North Carolina after other hurricanes. We will do whatever we can. One way or another, we will respond, we will not sit on the sidelines, merely going about our lives grateful that a hurricane of this magnitude didn’t hit the Cape. If thousands of churches across the country respond what a difference it will make and what a witness it will be.

Another thing we can do is strive to conserve energy, especially gasoline and oil in any ways we can.

I asked the Deacons if we could receive a special offering today to help the relief effort, which I originally thought we would give to Church World Service as they work to help in the region. There are many other fine organizations such as the Red Cross, World Relief, and others that are worthy of support. However, the more I’ve prayed and thought about it, I wonder if it would be good for us as a church to decide if we will put our faith and love in action in response to this crisis in a more personal way than just giving to a national organization. If so, we can use the special offering and other gifts for

this purpose to help a church that is directly involved in the relief effort and I have the names of several in Louisiana and Texas, or to assist an organization like ShareYourHome. We can use funds to buy materials, supplies, and other needed items for a work group to take down.

I am willing to discuss how we can respond with anyone who would like to explore our options after the worship service.

This is a time of crisis, of danger and opportunity. Let us be a church that focuses on selflessness, not selfishness; courage not corruption; hope not hopelessness; compassion not indifference.

Let us remember and fulfill the words of the Lord with which we began, *“I want you to share your food with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. If you do these things, your salvation will come like the dawn. Yes, your healing will come quickly. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. Then when you call, the Lord will answer, ‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply. Stop oppressing the helpless and stop making false accusations and spreading vicious rumors! Feed the hungry and help those in trouble. Your children will rebuild the deserted ruins. Then you will be known as the people who rebuild their walls and cities.”* Isaiah 58:7-10a, 12