

Our Own Blue Tarps

August 21, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English

Romans 12:1-8 and Matthew 16:13-20

This past week, the 2004 Annual Report of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Fund arrived in the mail and I found many of the words quite timely. I referred to the introduction to the report, the part printed in our bulletin as worship notes, with our younger disciples a few moments ago. The report also tells us:

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance programmed approximately \$6 million to meet the immediate and long-term recovery needs of disaster survivors and to provide a witness of caring in 32 countries internationally, 26 states nationally, and two United States territories.

You heard a few moments ago how the annual report cover looks like part of a bright blue polyvinyl tarp with a grommet in the corner. The summation of the report's introduction is:

If red is the color that screams out "emergency," then blue is the color that seems to announce, "help has arrived – your cries of distress are heard." Flying over hurricane-ravaged regions of the United State or entering encampments of displaced people and refugees internationally, blue is the color that dominates the landscapes. It is amazing the many and varied ways in which a simple blue tarp creates temporary shelter, protects people and possessions from the elements, or serves as a protective barrier on the ground.

"Out of chaos, hope" is the overall theme, but the Annual Report gives nine examples with additional dichotomies of grace in the wake of tragedy. Let us read aloud those ten phrases as found as the "Meditation" on the first page of this worship bulletin. Please join me:

Out of chaos, hope; out of grief, consolation; out of fear, faith; out of destruction, rebirth; out of loss, redemption; out of suffering, comfort; out of crisis, commitment; out of experience, wisdom; out of discord, dialogue; out of the storm, calm.

There are specific examples are of how our gifts were used.

- Last September, a siege of a school in Beslan in one of the Russian Republics left 338 people, half of them children dead. God was at work as people sought *consolation* as caregivers were taught how to handle the *grief* of surviving children and their families.
- In Indonesia, where *fear* keeps Christians and Muslims at odds, our funds are used to ensure new relationships might be based on a mutual *faith* in the God of Abraham.
- When a major earthquake in Iran in December, 2003 caused mass *destruction*, some of our gifts were used to start the process of *rebirth* of homes and towns and lives.
- Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne caused incredible *losses* from the Caribbean to Pennsylvania and everywhere in between. There is *redemption* to be found in disaster assistance that comes from our gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing to the time and effort of groups like our Senior Youth Mission Team as loss finds redemption in large and small ways.

- And so it continues, ... from how tragedies allow God's hand to be at work bringing *comfort* out of *suffering*, new *commitments* out of numerable *crises*, God's gift of *wisdom* out of some of the most painful of *experiences*, some *dialogue* where once there was only *discord*, and in so many ways, the *calm* of God, the gift of God's peace, that comes in the wake of the worst of *storms*.

That last one, - out of the storm, calm, is listed in the context of the world's response to the tragedy we know as the "massive tsunami that affected much of South Asia and reached parts of Africa."

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To many of us, it feels as though in this last month the people of Gates Presbyterian Church were hit by a tsunami. All too many of us lost a parent, a sibling or other loved one. Last week it was my turn when my father died at the age of 86 after a long and wonderful life. This morning, it was Warren Larsen who died. Only last night, in a hospital bed at Strong Hospital, he told his wife Iva that he would see her in the morning. He was oh, so right. Blind these last 26 years, he does see her this morning!

Much of this is hard under even under the best of circumstances. Melody's murder sapped the emotional and spiritual energy of many of us. Serious illness and ever growing cancers has us scared for the lives of some peoples we know. Tom's massive heart attack last Saturday and how must now wait for a heart transplant – must wait for someone his size within 1500 miles of Rochester with A negative blood to die so that he can live - seems like a proverbial "last straw." When I got back to New York four days ago, some if not all of the more tragic words found in those ten dichotomies seemed to define the mood of all too many of us. Hear them in that context:

chaos, ... grief, ... fear, ... destruction, ... loss, ... suffering, ... crisis, ... experience, ... discord, ... storm

If not asked in these exact words, some of the underlying – if not timeless- questions and comments seemed to be "where is God in all of this?" "How can God let bad things happen to good people?" "How can we recover from this much pain all at one time?" "This seems like a bit much for us to handle."

The line "God will not give me anything I can't handle" has no basis in Scripture much less in truth. The truth is that sometimes life's circumstances can become unbearable and beyond the point of what *one person* can handle. Frankly, it is cruel if not criminal to tell someone "God will only give you what you can handle." Even Mother Teresa apparently had her doubts about that line. On one occasion she said:

I know that God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish He didn't trust me so much.

This is the point in composing this sermon that I got more than a little "stuck." Much wiser people have grappled with these questions and ideas over the centuries and many persons find their answers wanting. But it was also at this point I found it wasn't only the words in the Disaster Assistance Annual Report that were timely.

In one of those “Duh!” moments, it was time to go back to Scripture – and in this case the timely words of the lectionary as found in Matthew’s Gospel and Paul’s Letter to the Romans. There is much poignancy to our reading about Simon Peter declaring Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters make much of Jesus’ affirmation of Peter as the “Rock” on which Jesus would build the church, that this is when Jesus named Peter to be the first Pope. Today’s announcement of grace and proclamation of Good News - and in particular to the part of the One Church of Jesus Christ we call Gates Presbyterian Church - is found in the latter half of what Jesus said to Peter. The first part includes “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,” but the second half shouts this promise: “and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

Paul’s words to the Christians in Rome are also timely, for they address how each of us is called to be part of that church of Jesus Christ that will prevail against all odds, even hell. Romans is the first of Paul’s letters in the New Testament *because* it is the last and most complete. After decades of ministry with the early church, Paul is able to draw on wisdom gleaned from years of wrestling with his own sense of God and God’s church to compose what we find in this letter. Paul used the metaphor of the body for the church at length in letters to the Christians in Corinth, indeed I Corinthians 12 is a lengthy version of what we find in just a few verses in Romans 12:

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ, let us use them ...

At Melody’s Memorial Service, we heard these words:

The church is often at its best in circumstances like these. Once again, the people of Gates Presbyterian Church demonstrate deep and genuine love for others.

I concluded with:

I look at you, Melody’s immediate family and promise this church family will do all in its power to comfort you who mourn and are distraught. We promise that in word, deed, our presence and through prayer, we will mirror the love of God in Jesus Christ our LORD.

May the grace of a Creating God, the love of a Redeeming Christ and the presence of an Empowering Spirit be with us all!

That brings us back to the words of the Disaster Assistance Annual Report which we adopt to our own use as people hit by so much in the last few weeks. That is when Paul’s words remind us of the differing gifts each of us brings to the table, to the mix, to the body that is the One Church of Jesus Christ. That is when Christ’s words to Peter come down through the ages and remind us that as fragile and frail is any human institution, the church, yes the people that together comprise the *church*, is the rock, the foundation, the hands, feet, mind, and presence of God where we can find real and lasting hope, consolation, faith, rebirth, redemption, comfort, commitment, wisdom, dialogue and calm. That is when we realize we need not face crises alone, that brother and sisters are here, no matter what comes, to offer a presence, tears, sometimes laughter, wisdom, time, talent, resources, shoulders on which to lean, hands with which to lift and hold, a witness of caring, and in all things an ever present love that can see us and embrace

us and walk with us no matter what! The church at its best will always be like our own blue tarp that announce, “help has arrived – your cries of distress are heard.”

Where is God in this mess? Right here, in our midst, working in and through us, to offer so much to those who are in need. The God Who offers the world and all its creatures free will, loves us in times of joy and in times of loss and sorrow. Certainly, the God Who allowed an “only Begotten” to die on a cross only to have Christ’s resurrection “rule the day,” will remind us of the victory that is ours not only on the other side of the grave but despite all the grave-like occurrences in our lives. Can we handle some of these events alone? No! And we are not expected to. God has given us each other, collectively, the church, so that we might stand against whatever may come, whatever may unfold, no matter the sickness, the illness, the death of a loved one, the tragedies of strife and war wrought of individual and corporate sin. Together, we can do *anything*, face *anything*, and come to celebrate God’s presence no matter what. In that vein, we end, where we started – for the church, the rock, with all of its peoples’ varieties of gifts can be that which, on global and individual ways promise and bring

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- out of discord, dialogue;
- out of the storm, calm.

Ah, calm. Yes, calm.

Amen.