

What happens in Mississippi -- Doesn't stay in Mississippi
Sermon for Mission Sunday, May 4, 2008

Good morning, please pray with me.

Creator God, help us to be grateful for all that we have. Help us take what we are learning about Katrina today and respond with action. Help us become living proof that our deeds can be as good as your doctrine of love. Amen

Even though the nine of us were not traveling to a foreign country last week we were all apprehensive as we took off for the south, and for Camp Hope, where we would be staying in Mississippi. One of our team members, Bob, had been in the New Orleans area shortly after Katrina and could tell us how it changed, but even after two and a half years it was surprising to see the devastation that still exists. We deliberately traveled to the 9th Ward and to St. Bernard parish, areas that saw the most destruction. That destruction was still very evident. The overgrowth of weeds was the only evidence that yards had once been cared for, that houses had stood on the empty concrete pads, that many families had lived in this area, one picture that was especially poignant in the montage you just saw depicts a set of front steps leading up to nothing because the house was gone. Every now and then we'd see a house that had been rebuilt, no neighbors, nothing but emptiness around it and we wondered if any other rebuilding will ever be done.

Just a few blocks from the French Quarter in New Orleans were tents set up under bridges where large numbers of people appear to be living in squalor. Now we don't know if those tents were there before the hurricane, but they are there now, there are children growing up in those tents.

On Sunday we made our way to southern Mississippi and eventually to Van Cleave. All of us were thinking the same thought as we drove through the town: this doesn't look so bad; what do they need us to do, why are we here? And then what did the preacher from the Van Cleave UMC said when he greeted us, "I'll bet you think everything looks pretty good around here and you are wondering why you are here?" He said that things looked good on the surface but underneath, down the back roads there was still a lot of destruction and that repairs were still desperately needed.

Our team was divided and I was assigned to help at Larry's house under the very able leadership of Fred Rosa. Larry was an older gentleman who owned his house. It was large, with four bedrooms. The front door looked like it had taken the full brunt of the storm and there was another front door standing against it because it was the wrong size and didn't fit. You might have been able to get a sense from the pictures you just saw what shape the house was in, but no picture could do it justice. And there is no way to convey how the house smelled except to say it was overwhelmingly unpleasant. There were only a few pieces of old and very dirty furniture.

Truth be told, nothing in or out of the house and yard looked like it had ever been cared for, we don't know how the house looked before Katrina; we had to let that go and just concentrate on doing our job. Our job was to lay pergo-like flooring in the whole house, like this piece I saved as a souvenir. At first we didn't know how we'd ever get that done in a week, but under Fred's guidance we all got into a rhythm and finished the floors by Wednesday afternoon. Jim and Fred saw to it that a new front door was delivered and Mark spent time with our group installing the new door. His most impressive discovery was a perfectly preserved rat skeleton that he found in the old door jamb – further evidence of the house's condition.

The toilet was not working; Fred checked it out and decided it could be easily fixed. You could not believe the condition of the bathroom in Larry's house; it looked like there was 25 years of filth encrusted on the toilet, the tub and the sink. And I decided – we can't leave the bathroom like that, especially since the house was being so spiffed up with the new floors and front door. So on Tuesday morning we made one of many trips to Lowe's and I shopped for cleaning products. . . and here I'm talking about, super dooper, industrial strength cleaning products. I bought a bottle of something that had visible fumes arise from it when I removed the cap because it was so powerful, and I bought a pumice stone and a big bottle of ammonia. And I tackled that bathroom, on my hands and knees scraping and scrubbing off filth, and I learned that I could hold my breath for long periods of time. It's a good thing there was a big hole in the wall of the bathroom that led to the outside.

We were able to spend a lot of time with Larry while we worked. He had recently found a job working to build oil rigs; he worked the night shift but let his sleep be disrupted for three days while we worked in his house. He made it a point to come out and sit with us while we ate lunch. He described how the water came rushing down his street and then caused all its damage by rushing back out and taking everything with it. It was clear that Larry had not been able to get much government aid right after Katrina; which is true for thousands of people. He had been waiting for that floor for a long time.

Our reward for working so quickly was to be assigned to Miss Betty's house on Thursday, Betty had her family in a MEMA cottage. MEMA stands for Mississippi emergency Methodist assistance. Even though the cottage was on wheels, Miss Betty told us it was not a trailer. It stood next to Betty's house, whose inside had been destroyed by the storm. The inside was already renovated and then someone decided to take a better look outside and realized how much work was needed there. Some work group before us had begun the task of removing the siding from the house – from the bottom up, wrongly – and that left us to take off all of the odd shaped, difficult siding from around the top of the house. You should have seen Jim Marshall hanging from some eave on the roof trying to reach the siding and then put up the protective layer while battling really, big wasps. I never knew how hard it could be to take off siding. Mary and I tried so hard to pry off some pieces and just couldn't do it, and Warren would step in to help– it was a very humbling experience.

The other Lakewood team worked on a house that had been rebuilt and they finished it; put in the cabinets and counter tops, all the appliances, hooked up the wiring and got the water turned on. This group was very skilled; my group visited the house on Friday morning and marveled at all of the problems they were figuring out. I saw Al solder a new piece of cooper tubing to replace a spot with a hole, Roy patiently trying all of the electrical connections to finish the fuse box, Bob putting the wheels on the washer and dryer. The owner of that house came by with a friend while we were there. Her friend told us of her experiences in Biloxi, how the water from Katrina was rising so fast that in order for her and her paralyzed husband to survive she had to push him under the water to go under a barrier. They told us about seeing trees and houses floating away, of people and animals stranded in trees.

We can never know the horrors that came with Katrina. We bought books with pictures and stories and learned that no one will ever really know all that went on in the Super Dome for those days after the storm, and how many awful experiences these people endured. One of the most sobering sights for me was to see the marks on the doors in New Orleans. Rescue people came by in boats and checked houses for bodies, then they would spray paint symbols on the door to indicate what date they had been there, who had checked, whether dead bodies had been found, and how many; this information was contained in a cross like shape. A lot of renovated houses still had these signs on them, maybe as a permanent reminder of Katrina.

Katrina is hardly in the news anymore, I wasn't sure how the rebuilding was going before this trip, but no news is good news right? So, if we didn't hear about it - it must be okay. Well, it's not okay. You all heard the stories about how the federal and state and city governments, not being prepared for such a disaster, could not and did not address all of the problems. While there are people who received a lot of aid and have rebuilt or moved on, there are thousands who did not receive any government aid, or enough aid and are really still destitute. This is especially true in south Mississippi which did not get as much publicity as New Orleans. Katrina took the lives of 235 Mississippians and destroyed 70,000 houses and apartments. Damages are estimated at more than \$1 billion.

Larry and Betty had been waiting for two and a half years to rebuild, Larry never got a trailer, he couldn't find a job, he didn't have a car, he didn't have power for a long time. Betty finally got a MEMA cottage but she watches her almost destroyed house a few yards away and wonders when it will ever be finished. And I wonder how these people could keep up hope after such a tragedy. We can't even begin to know how often all of them have cried and felt utterly hopeless.

Nonetheless, there was an immediate response to Katrina from the faith community; we just never heard much about it. That is how Camp Hope was born. Pastor Robbie from the Van Cleave UMC told us how a couple of days after Katrina, church people began calling to say they could come to help and wanted to know where to deliver goods and supplies. Out of the desire of people who just wanted to help, came the Mississippi Disaster Relief

movement. Just think about this, volunteers wanted to come to help, but everything was destroyed, so where would they stay? How could they work without power, how could they eat? The Van Cleave church began to allow construction materials to be stored in and around it and let volunteers sleep in the pews. Today, behind the church sits a very large building that contains two dorm rooms each with 28 bunk beds, offices, and a large warehouse to store tools and materials. Camp Hope could house 100 volunteers now. Someone was there to tell us what to do, to show us where to go, to deliver materials to us. Volunteers from the church cooked breakfast and dinner for us each day. United Methodists have helped more than 60,000 people rebuild 25,000 homes on the Gulf Coast in the first two years after Katrina. Sadly, there is still much work to be done.

This trip to Mississippi was a first mission trip for some participants. And while we didn't know what to expect, we knew why we were there – to work – to serve – that is Mission. As we traveled around Gautier, Moss Point and Ocean Springs in our big van with Lakewood UMC emblazoned on the side, everyone was unfailingly polite, most everyone asked if we were there working on houses and thanked us for being there. The people who we helped were very grateful. But that is not why we worked, why we served. As Jeanne read, "Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants – doing what God wants you to do – doing what God wants you to do." "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve others."

Perhaps you are uncomfortable with the concept of being a servant, but that is what we are called to do, as committed Christians. In second Corinthians we heard, that we must each decide in our hearts how much to give, that's why I cleaned Larry's bathroom. It was a gift. The rest of his house was so much improved, but it was difficult to relate a dirty toilet to scriptures, or to God's call, or to being a committed Christian. Or is that what mission and service are at their most fundamental levels? Making ourselves aware of the needs of the people and then committing to meeting those needs. The motto at Camp Hope was "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape." Being flexible was hard, I think we all groaned when we saw the siding we had to remove, but that was our job and we did it. We were not in control, we were not calling the shots, we were there to be humble servants.

Part of what we did in Mississippi did stay in Mississippi, the new floors, the finished house, the house a step closer to new siding. People in Mississippi got to talk to Coloradans, or Yankees, as were called from the first day. They saw how hard we could work, and that we did more than we had to do, not reluctantly, but cheerfully.

But a lot of what we did in Mississippi did not stay there. We brought back the wonderful pictures you saw, thanks to Jim and Mary, we brought back experiences we will never forget, experiences I hope we will all share with anyone who will listen, we brought back a contentment that comes from having done a good job, from having focused on other people's problems. We were reminded that our daily grind experiences are nothing compared to the people from Mississippi who lost so much, and maybe we learned to stop

complaining as much. We brought back a desire to go on another mission trip and to take a friend or family member with us this time. We brought back closer relationships with God, because as we have served the least of God's people we have served God. We brought back pride for our church and for all of you.

You all supported us with your prayers, and your monetary gifts. And this is just the beginning of mission season. Jim Marshall will be going on other mission trips to New Mexico and Montana and South Dakota, the kids will be going to Nebraska to work and serve. There is room for you on one of these mission trips or on the exciting mission trips the Mission Team is already planning for 2009. Don't let the words we recite at worship about serving others and good acts become meaningless words. This church's Christian love and commitment to servant hood grew in Mississippi but it didn't stay there, it will be going on all the other mission trips; it will be going out to our community, to our country and to the world.

Let us pray.

May God bless you with anger at the failure to respond to disasters in this country so that you will work for and demand equal and sufficient assistance.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from the loss of homes, loved ones, and hope, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain into joy.

May God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done. Amen