

Proper 17-A
Sept. 2-3, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

Like most of you, I have spent a lot of time this past week watching people in Houston and surrounding areas walk through waist-deep (or deeper) water on their city streets; We've seen the crowded shelters, the flooded homes, the vast expanse of swamp-like conditions that extend for miles and miles along the Gulf Coast.

Hurricane Harvey has brought more rain than anyone could imagine. I read this week that it would take at least six years in this region to have as much rain as this part of Texas has received in just a few days.

This would be unimaginable if we were not watching it every day in real time. And it is heartbreaking. I have friends in that wide area, and I'm sure you do as well. One of my friends is fortunate enough to live at a slightly higher elevation and last I heard she was safe and in her home. Another friend has a couple of feet of water sloshing around in her house and her family has moved in with friends who live on dry (or at least drier) ground.

For thousands and thousands of people, this has been a week that has been soggy, dangerous and confusing. It has been a time of displacement, disaster, despair. And it is heart-breaking to observe. That water is beginning to recede, but the misery continues.

But of course we do more than observe. We share in that pain because of the humanity that we share. We offer our prayers. We do what we can to contribute to

some of the immeasurable need of those who are living in this climatic nightmare. We care in whatever way we can.

In our collect today (the prayer at the beginning of the liturgy) , we prayed “Graft in our hearts the love of your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness and bring forth in us the fruit of good works...” This is a prayer that literally ‘collects up’ some concerns that we bring to God. I’ve always been fascinated with the phrase ‘increase in us true religion.’

I suspect that part of ‘true religion’ has to do with how our religion connects to all of our life. It’s not just what happens in church for sure. Alice Walker, in her wonderful essay “In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens,” wrote , “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.” And indeed it does.

True religion has to do with living the values, the healthy relationships, the acts of compassion, the respect for all people, the reliance on God, that we are taught by our faith. They are the practice of religion. Surely our response to a devastating hurricane falls into that category and brings forth the fruit of good works.

We get some help in today’s scripture – particularly from Romans where we heard some teaching that was most likely intended for converts to the faith in that early Christian faith community—people preparing for baptism. And it begins with love.

“Let love be genuine,” Paul writes. “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

He continues by urging hope, patience, prayer, generosity and hospitality -- as well as humility, compassion, peacemaking and living for the common good.

In my study of this bit of scripture this week, one commentator said this passage could form not just a sermon but a whole retreat. And I think he is right. This is a huge and wise bit of teaching on how we treat one another. Certainly it is addressed to life in the Christian community – the Church. But it also generalizes to all of life.

And it is challenging. Living in the manner that he describes takes both grace and effort. It takes the gift of God’s loving presence in our lives and our own desire to live into that love.

At the Saturday evening service yesterday, we welcomed a child named Oliver into the Church through baptism. And, of course, we joined with his parents and sponsors and renewed our own baptismal covenant. All of those familiar promises seemed to reinforce Paul’s teaching in Romans, but most especially the last three that we said we would do ‘with God’s help.’

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” How, in other words, do we live in ways that communicate the sense of unconditional love and genuine hope that is our gift to live? How do those things pervade our lives and relationships?

I had a friend in a former parish who lived this out by a daily commitment to offer some bit of affirmation to everyone she met that day – something as simple as thanking a waitress for good service. It was an amazing spiritual practice that blessed others – friends and strangers -- in a genuine way.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” How does this promise live in us? It might be something as simple as a random act of kindness. Or it could be an effort to welcome a stranger who is not in our usual circle of friends and acquaintances. For several months we’ve had of those signs in the front yard that says, in several languages, that all are welcome to be our neighbor. I don’t know if anyone even notices it, but it did result in a delightful conversation in Spanish with a door-to-door salesman one afternoon.

Finally, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?” Sometimes it feels like this call to respect the dignity of all is getting to be a bigger and bigger challenge in our nation and in our world. Increasingly we hear disparaging things about individuals and groups that chip away their dignity. As anxiety increases, the rhetoric seems to intensify. How do we turn the tide of disrespect and live with the knowledge that everyone is a child of God, worthy of love and respect? We could also make it a spiritual practice as we look for opportunities to model this.

Perhaps we live in a time that truly needs the practice of our ‘true religion’. It never hurts to be reminded from time to time that we are all children of God.

The aftermath of a devastating hurricane and a thousand-year flood will be before us for some time. This is an opportunity to embrace ‘true religion’ to muster the compassion, the generosity, the prayer to support and embrace the suffering and displaced people of those Gulf Coast communities in a time of profound need.

May it be so.

