

OCC Home Devotional

For Family or Group Discussion, or Individual Reflection
Rev. Rob Fredrickson • Sunday, September 17, 2017

“Nature’s Cruel Wrath”

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
until the destroying storms pass by.

— Psalm 57:1 (NRSV)

With the extensive news coverage of hurricanes Harvey and Irma, our thoughts and prayers have no doubt turned, quite often in recent weeks, to those directly affected by these powerful storms.

As something of a news junkie myself, I’ve seen, heard, and read quite a bit about these two recent hurricanes. I’ve taken notice of some insightful comments on hurricanes in general—and, even more broadly, on natural disasters. Quite rightly, it seems to me, some expert observers have poked holes a myth that is widely held to be self-evidently true: the myth that natural disasters “don’t discriminate.”

Some accept this myth as true because they see the video footage of pricey beach homes being damaged, not just low-income housing. Some accept this myth as true because they see that disasters affect people of all skin colors, males and females alike. Some accept this myth as true because they see how disasters impact both rural communities and urban centers.

But I’m convinced that it is indeed a myth—an “un-truth”—that disasters don’t discriminate. When a disaster strikes, those of higher socio-economic status tend to have sturdier and better-equipped homes, good property insurance, good health insurance, the ability to pay inflated prices for scarce resources like water and gasoline, and access to multiple modes of transportation if evacuation is ordered. Those who are relatively young and healthy are the strongest, most agile, most mobile of residents—best able to react quickly to rapidly changing conditions. Full-fledged citizens

need not fear any legal or bureaucratic peril in accepting emergency assistance from government sources. And those who live in low-crime areas typically don’t fear answering the front door—especially in an emergency rescue situation.

Meanwhile, those of lower socio-economic status may live in unreinforced and poorly-equipped homes, may lack property insurance, may have very high health insurance deductibles, may not be able to afford price-gouged water and gas, may not own a car, and may not have the means to pay for a bus or plane ticket. Those who are elderly and/or infirmed are the weakest, least agile, least mobile of residents—least able to react quickly to rapidly changing conditions. Immigrants and refugees may fear discovery and reprisal if they accept help from government sources. And those who live in high-crime areas may be reluctant to unlock the front door—even if an aid worker or first responder stands knocking on the other side.

Yes... It’s true that hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, floods, droughts, heat waves, polar vortices, wildfires, and other disasters strike without regard to the demographics of their victims. In that particular sense, they don’t discriminate.

But it’s also undeniably true that our coping capacity in the face of a disaster is not at all equal. In that sense, the adverse effects of most, if not all, natural disasters fall disproportionately upon those who are most vulnerable. When the after-incident tallies are made—deaths, injuries, homes and businesses destroyed, etc.—they rarely look like a cross-sectional microcosm of the population at-large. The poor, the sick, the elderly, those with special physical or cognitive or emotional needs, the lonely, the fearful...these are the people who are over-represented in those grim statistics.

I raise all this only to double- and triple-underscore the importance of responding generously to assist the victims of Harvey and Irma—and the victims of other disasters. Let’s not forget that a multi-nation famine of historic proportions is happening right now in eastern Africa and Yemen. A powerful 8.1-magnitude earthquake rocked southern Mexico and Guatemala earlier this month. And multiple life-threatening wildfires continue to rage in the western portion of our own nation. May God move us to profound compassion and stir us to Spirit-led action. Amen.

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