

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Romans 8:35-39

September 4, 2005  
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35Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."<sup>[a]</sup> 37No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>[b]</sup> neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This past week was going to be the week. It was the week that I was finally going to get serious about losing the extra weight from pregnancy. After all, Nathan is eight months now and it's well-passed time to be getting back into shape. I weighed myself at the gym on Monday, set reasonable weight loss goals for the remainder of the year, planned out a healthy menu for the week, and I was on a roll. That is until I began watching coverage of Hurricane Katrina on TV. Suddenly I found myself eating everything in sight. It took me until about Friday to figure out what the feeding frenzy was all about. Comfort. I was trying to comfort myself. Every day I was checking for news of the aftermath when I was at home I watched CNN, in the car I listened to NPR, and while at work checked the internet news sites. All we I sat at my desk and instead of catching up on the work that had accumulated since our vacation, I watched that horrific news coverage over and over again. And after watching two or three replays of news stories from MSNBC on the internet I would be really sad. I didn't feel like writing my sermon or committee reports. So, I would go downstairs to the kitchen and snatch a couple of the cookies left over from the Salad Sale out of the freezer. I didn't understand what I was doing at the time. I was just feeling depressed after the news and so didn't feel inspired to do my work. So I tried to distract myself and went downstairs to eat cookies. The I felt guilty for eating the cookies and to get my mind off of my foiled diet, I would check in on the internet. And thus it went for the better part of the week. I'm hoping I've got a handle on it now that I realize what was going on, but just in case I don't, would someone please put those cookies out for coffee hour today and if no one eats them, just take them home?

I hope you found a less fattening way to respond to the hurricane coverage. How did you react when you watched the news coverage of the devastation? How has your heart been this past week? And how does it feel to be back here, within the safety and sanctuary of your church home?

The Sunday after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, churches recorded unparalleled levels of attendance at their worship services. The catastrophic events of that week, the horror and fear that we experienced, set our minds to thinking about the bigger issues in life. Instead of stressing out about deadlines at work or what to have for dinner that night, we were stressed about our national security, our personal safety, and the future of our democracy. Life as we knew it came to a screeching halt as images of airplanes crashing into buildings played over and over again on our television screens and in our minds.

And now we face a new threat and challenge as Christians and as a nation--the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But this time it's a bit harder to wrap our heads around the devastation—instead of three distinct places where terrorists struck—The World Trade Center, The Pentagon, and a crash site in Pennsylvania, we're just now beginning to realize that an entire region of our country, the coast along the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico, has been destroyed. I don't have to tell you what you've heard over and over again on the news—entire towns gone, catastrophic damage in Biloxi, Gulfport, and New Orleans, dead bodies floating in flood waters, hungry and tired residents desperate for help, acts of violence enacted on the most vulnerable members of our society. If I think about it too much, I just become overwhelmed and want to eat some more. And yet, even though it's often on my mind and in my heart, it's somehow easier not to think about this hurricane catastrophe than it was the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies. It seems more removed. Perhaps it's because, with September 11, we didn't know when or where the next terrorist might strike and so we were hyper-vigilant about changing some of the ways in which we lived in order to protect ourselves. But in this case, we're not so much at risk. I've heard a lot of folks saying, "Sure am glad I live Up North" and I echo the sentiment. But we need to be careful, don't we? We're not immune from danger up here, though we are safer than a lot of parts of the country. But, as gas prices sky-rocket and goods become more expensive, we also realize that we're not immune from the effects of the hurricane.

And I think that perhaps it's good that we have reminders that all is not well, otherwise it would be easy to fool ourselves into thinking that it was. I think of the other night. Corey and I took Nathan for a picnic on the beach. We were amused as he watched the seagulls, we enjoyed a simple meal and a fine vintage of non-alcoholic sparkling grape juice, we buried our toes in the sand, and then, to top it off, we ran into a bunch of fine folks from this church who were a nice cap off to our evening. After a night like that, it would have been easy to come home with our heads buried in the sand just as our toes had been buried in the sand earlier. And perhaps that's what might have happened had we not stopped for gas on the way home. It cost \$48 to fill up the tank of our Impala. Suddenly, there was a very poignant reminder that not all was well.

I find it hard to strike a balance between enjoying all of the blessings in my life during this beautiful holiday weekend while also keeping in mind those for whom life has become a living hell. It's been made quite clear what I can do to help, I can give money, buy supplies, and pray. But all of these are, in their own ways, rather temporary accommodations. Long after I have donated all I'm going to donate and the pleas for help on television get replaced with trailers for the upcoming TV season premiere's, there will still be thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced as a result of this hurricane while my life will go on basically as it had before.

And quite frankly, that's the way I want it. But I'm not so sure that's the way that God would have it. This hurricane, as my friend Bill Belko, pastor of Trinity UCC in Northport put it, is a moment of truth. And not just for the residents of the Gulf Region, but for all of us. In this moment of truth we might be forced, as individuals and as a nation, to admit that perhaps it is due to socio-economic bias and latent racism that help hasn't reached the hurricane victims as quickly as it should have. In this moment of truth we might be forced to consider that global warming is real and its effects are wreaking havoc on our fragile environment. In this moment of truth we might be forced to consider that even the strongest of man-made protections cannot

begin to compete with Mother Nature's wrath. In this moment of truth we might be forced to consider that we need our National Guard here, at home, to protect us. In this moment of truth we might be forced to consider that as Christians, we are called upon to be the Middle Man in this tragedy, giving generously of all we have been given in order that others might simply live. This surely is a moment of truth—for us as individuals, a congregation, a community, and a nation. What are we going to do with our moment of truth?

Let's take this moment of truth to confess the sin that inhabits our lives, the sin that causes us to cling onto what we have, to judge others, and to practice discriminating compassion. Let's take this moment of truth to let the waves of grief and sadness that have been threatening us all week to wash over us. Let's take this moment of truth to admit that, in the end, we are not in control and can't go on with our heads buried in the sand pretending that we are. And, let's take this moment of truth to let ourselves sit in the loving hands of God knowing the promise *that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Knowing that even if it was one of us taking refuge on a rooftop in New Orleans, sun scorched by day and eaten alive by mosquitoes at night, that God would be right there with us, abiding with us as an ever present help in trouble.

These are our truths in the midst of the Hurricane Devastation—that everything is not okay, that we are part of the problem and the solution, that there is hope, and that God is here—and there. These are the truths we acknowledge and celebrate around this table. Our participation in this holy meal is the beginning of our response. So come, let us break bread together, remembering our brothers and sisters in crisis, remembering the crisis in our own lives, celebrating our blessings, and looking to the future with hope—knowing that nothing can separate us, or anybody else for that matter, from the God that loves us and has invited us here.