

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Pentecost 16-Proper 18(A)
Sunday, September 4, 2005

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

A LABOR OF LOVE

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ Amen.

There is an old hymn entitled "Count Your Blessings." The text of this hymn reminds us that we are gifted people. The refrain of this hymn goes like this: "Count your many blessings, name them one by one; count your many blessings, see what God has done." God gifts us in so many wonderful ways. It can be an amazing experience to ponder how incredibly blessed we are. Putting all our material blessings aside for a moment, we are gifted with the most precious gift of all, God's grace in Christ Jesus. The promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ are gifts we live with every day. Indeed, we are "gifted grace fully"! That is three words "gifted grace fully." The apostle Paul reminds us to let love and grace be the constant factor in how we live among our neighbors. St. Paul says that we are to "Put on Christ" as we live each day. At the center of being "gifted grace fully" is dealing with life's issues with a sense of love, grace and compassion. How does one grace-fully share the love of Christ even in the toughest situations?

As we watch T. V., each of us has stories about New Orleans. For me, I remember 1997 when I spent six days in July there in the center of the city with young people at the National Lutheran Youth Gathering. New Orleans is the hometown of one of our kid's friends who drove all the way from New Orleans this past June to Chicago to help our kids move at the end of the school year. Peter O and his family are Ok. Kim Conway has a brother that lives there and Kim you went to high school and college in New Orleans. Others of you have lived there once upon a time. We all have been affected by what has happened there in the past week since we gathered here at worship.

A natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina is frightening. One of the biggest fears is that many things in life are beyond our control. That is an important lesson for us to learn but it can be twisted into a kind of learned helplessness and that is not what God wants for us. What is the difference between a healthy humility about what we can and cannot control and a kind of learned helplessness? Learned helplessness is paralyzing, while appropriate humility is liberating and empowering. Humility leads us to acknowledge that we cannot control the wind, and it leads us to a deeper appreciation of just how fragile and precious human life is. A healthy sense of connectedness to humanity gives us compassion to grieve with the suffering, share the righteous anger with those who found that their poverty trapped them in unspeakably awful conditions, as well as rejoicing with those reunited with families and finding ways to serve others even in the midst of loss.

As we come to worship on this Labor Day weekend, the global implications of our faith in Jesus Christ are important for us to discern. Just before we come next Sunday on Rally Day, which is September 11, a day when the world changed, now the world has changed once again. Once more, we have a date and a name that will not be forgotten. This time the

watchword will be "Katrina" a storm that marks the days of our lives.

At times like this, we ask what powers we have and how we are called to use them to further Jesus' compassion and justice in the world. Many of us have resources that can be offered individually, opening homes and schools, and opening wallets to help. We also have the power of the Christian community. St. Paul's instructions to the Christians in Rome who were living in a troubled world was this "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Love calls us also to repentance. Instead of complaining about the high cost of gas prices, perhaps we can examine how we use the resources of our world. Are there things we can do to change the wastefulness we have caused in the world? Love calls us to action. The labor of love calls us to compassion. It starts when two or three gather, and Jesus comes among us. It begins to take root when we listen together to Christ's voice, to discern what we are called to do together with the power we have as Christ's body.

In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, there is an Episcopal church, St. Mark's. It is an old church-so old that it was standing in the year 1889, when a terrible flood wiped out Johnstown, killing the church's rector and his family and over 2,000 people besides. When the floodwaters *receded* and the church was cleaned up and reopened, survivors decided to engrave upon the altar a verse not commonly carved on altars. From Song of Solomon 8:7. "Many waters cannot quench love." The verse goes on to say, "Neither can floods drown it."

There is no power-not even death itself that can drown love. We have the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ even as we are overwhelmed by the Images we have witnessed and the friends and loved ones we know who experienced devastation in the gulf this week. The gift of God's grace is why we come together, to pray, sing, and invite Jesus among us so that we can catch once again a glimpse of God's dream for the world, and discern together what would be one step, the next step we should take toward being God's people who Labor for Love. Jesus is among us, we have what we need. Now let us be about the mission of being God's people here and wherever we can make a difference.

In Jesus', name Amen.

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