

HURRICANE KATRINA, GULFPORT, AND THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

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THE IMPACT OF LOVE

“**L**ook again. The information you are sending me cannot be true, it is impossible! It simply cannot happen. You have made a mistake, look again!” On August, 29, 2005 that was the message my brain was sending to my eyes. “Look again, that is impossible, it cannot be true!” But it was. The images of destruction and devastation transmitted by the cable news networks to my eyes and on to my brain were surreal, but sadly and tragically, they were true. Hurricane Katrina, with her winds in excess of one hundred seventy-five miles per hour and her storm surge in excess of thirty feet, had destroyed a significant portion of Gulfport, Mississippi, the city in which I live and serve as the Pastor of First Baptist Church. In the days immediately following the landfall of Katrina, the nation learned the massive scope of her destruction. Much of the Gulf Coast, from New Orleans, Louisiana to Mobile, Alabama, lay in ruins. While my knowledge of the destruction of the region is limited, my knowledge of the destruction of Gulfport, Mississippi is both personal and complete. From “D-Day plus 2,” I, along with my fellow citizens, have lived the story of “relief, recovery and rebuild” along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. For the residents of Gulfport, this is not a story of governmental assistance or a failure of governmental leadership. This is a story of love overcoming the worst natural disaster in our nation’s history. In this article you will find no ivory tower prose, no academic jargon, none is intended. This is one pastor’s personal account of the Christian Church in America fulfilling what the Lord Jesus gave as the Second Commandment – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39) – and the account begins with a lady named Katrina.

A STORY OF DESTRUCTION

Gulfport’s “Katrina Story” actually began on Friday, August 26, 2005 when Katrina wobbled to the north and Mississippi found itself inside the “cone of landfall probability.” As the weekend passed the storm grew and by Sunday morning Hurricane Katrina had reached “Cat 5” in strength. The experts from the National Weather Center were predicting a direct hit on the Louisiana-Mississippi Coast with Gulfport being in the northeast quadrant of impact, the quadrant of destruction. As Sunday unfolded most of our residents completed the task of boarding their homes and businesses and evacuated the city. Some, regrettably, being either novices to the dangers of hurricanes, or having been survivors of Hurricane Camille in 1969, decided to ride the storm out at home; a decision most would regret within the next twenty-four hours.

As landfall occurred on August 29, the destruction of structures in Gulfport was severe and widespread. In Harrison County, where Gulfport, Mississippi serves as the

county seat 30,000 homes were destroyed and an additional 45,000 homes were severely damaged. With a population of 74,000 residents, the second most populated city in the State of Mississippi lay in ruins. Vital resources such as food, water, ice, basic communications, electrical services and gasoline were non-existent. Governmental services were limited and those limited resources were devoted to search and rescue. Within hours of landfall the residents of Gulfport found themselves without the basics of life. Gulfport was definitely a city in crisis.

A STORY OF LOVE

The Love of Individual Believers

As the winds and water of Katrina began to recede, the Christian community across America mobilized. Individual believers, local churches, denominations and religious organizations flooded the region with volunteers and supplies. Within days of landfall, motivated by the love and teachings of Jesus, volunteers began to make a real difference in the lives of the citizens of Gulfport. Individuals like the two “strangers” from Indianapolis, Indiana who drove their pick-up trucks loaded with food, water and baby supplies arriving in Gulfport on September 1st. Within fifteen minutes they distributed their supplies at a low-income apartment complex in downtown Gulfport. I offered shelter for the night and a cold meal “straight out of the can” but they declined, responding, “No thank you. The good Lord told us to come and bring what we could. We have done that, so now it’s time to go home.” Such was the testimony of thousands of volunteers in the early days following the landfall of Katrina. God spoke to their hearts; the volunteers heard His voice and obediently responded in compassion, racing to our aid with the resources they possessed. When their deliveries were made and their missions accomplished they returned home. Little did we know many of the volunteers returned home simply to recoup, restock and return. Consistently, the residents of Gulfport have discovered the Second Commandment to be at the very heart of their motivation. The volunteers have simply embraced the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Love of a Local Church

The story of love is also the story of local congregations. Churches of every denominational stripe; Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc., struggled to respond to the massive numbers of hurting people, people whose homes were battered and whose lives were shattered. Not only did these congregations labor to help a hurting citizenry, in many cases they worked together; Baptists with Methodists, Presbyterians with Episcopalians, the young with the elderly, the rich with the poor, Caucasians with African-Americans. In essence, the church simply joined hands to fulfill the admonition of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.” I readily acknowledge and express appreciation for the local congregations who have worked continuously in the relief efforts in Gulfport. My colleagues in ministry are to be commended for their creative response, tireless efforts and total focus on helping our community. However, in this section I have chosen to focus on the response to Hurricane Katrina of which I have the most intimate knowledge, the response of First Baptist Church of Gulfport.

In the days following the landfall of the storm the members and ministerial staff of First Baptist Church found themselves overwhelmed with ministry challenges and ministry opportunities. In the early days ministry was reactionary. Members helped their neighbors. They shared the “basics of post-hurricane life;” water, food, ice, gasoline, chainsaws, flashlights and batteries. Most of all they shared the love and message of Jesus. They led teams of volunteers to remove downed trees, tarp damaged roofs, and deliver truck loads of food to outlying areas. Our members listened, hugged, wept and prayed with their friends next door and strangers across town. They were the hands and feet of Jesus.

Our ministerial staff initiated a “strategic plan” of assistance that evolved with each passing week. During week one the plan was simple. We divided our “ministry field” into districts. Each minister was assigned a district and the minister spent the day traveling throughout their assigned area ministering to church members, distributing food and water and discovering the needs of residents living in the district. Since all communications equipment was inoperable, at approximately 8:00 PM we would gather at my home, enjoy a meal prepared by my wife on the camp stove and share our findings. These sessions ended with assignments to the staff to meet the needs discovered during the day, the assignment of new districts for the following day, and prayer. During week two we formed a partnership with our mission congregation Crosspoint Church of Gulfport. On their property we developed a staging area for volunteer teams that were arriving daily. The staging area provided teams with space for camping, cooking and the accumulation of materials and equipment. Each morning volunteer teams received “work orders” submitted by residents in need, a member of FBC, Gulfport or Crosspoint Church to serve as a team leader, and the equipment needed to remove a downed tree, tarp a roof, or “mud out” a home. Priority was given to the homes of our “first-responders;” firemen, policemen, and rescue personnel. To date this staging area continues to serve the residents of Gulfport under the leadership of Crosspoint Church.

During the months that followed Katrina, additional ministries flowed to our neighbors in Gulfport from the volunteers of First Baptist Church. New work boots were distributed to “first-responders” and new shoes to school-age children. An emergency day care center was established for the children of city employees enabling the employees to get back to work running the day to day operations of the city. In December of 2005, Christmas gift-boxes were distributed to the students at three elementary schools. By the summer of 2006, First Baptist Church, in partnership with the North Carolina Baptist Men, an auxiliary organization with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, had established a volunteer village to host short-term mission volunteers engaged in non-construction ministry projects. To date some 2200 volunteers have led Vacation Bible Schools in smaller churches throughout the county, hosted Bible clubs in FEMA trailer parks, run summer sports camps at local school facilities, prayer-walked neighborhoods, and hosted neighborhood block-parties. Recently, the volunteers at First Baptist Church re-opened Gulf Coast Community Ministries, a ministry evangelism project designed to meet the physical needs of people while sharing the Gospel of Christ. With the landfall of Katrina, the facilities of Gulf Coast Community Ministries were destroyed. Today, in leased facilities, the ministry offers a food bank, medical clinic and pharmacy, Christ-centered counseling, and English classes for ethnic residents. For the volunteers of First Baptist Church it is their way of following the teaching of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Love of a Denomination

First Baptist Church, Gulfport is a congregation affiliated on the national level with the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptists have been at the forefront of faith community response to Hurricane Katrina. From the millions of dollars in aid given by the members of Southern Baptist churches to the ministry of Operation Noah in the City of New Orleans, Southern Baptists have gone the proverbial “extra mile” to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In Gulfport, the response of Southern Baptists has been most admirable. Due to the vastness of the destruction caused by Katrina, the pastoral leadership of First Baptist quickly realized the response needed in Gulfport was beyond the resources of any one congregation or local Baptist association. A request for help went out through the channels of Southern Baptist life and on September 5, 2005 the North Carolina Baptist Men arrived in the City of Gulfport. Their initial relief efforts included the distribution of water and ice along with the serving of three hot meals a day to the residents of our community. Along with these “basics of life” ministries the Baptist volunteers from North Carolina removed trees from roofs, covered damaged roofs with tarps to prevent further destruction from inclement weather, cleaned laundry for residents without electricity, and performed a host of other ministries. Through the leadership of Richard Brunson, the Executive Director of the North Carolina Baptist Men, and Eddie and Martha Williams, the Gulfport Rebuild Coordinators, the North Carolina Baptist Men established a multi-year partnership with the City of Gulfport to continue to provide life-changing ministry to the residents of our city. The North Carolina volunteers have repaired homes, painted schools, built playgrounds, refurbished a high school athletic facility, shared the Gospel of Christ, and brought hope to our city.

In September of 2007, the North Carolina Baptist Men celebrated their second anniversary of ministry in Gulfport, Mississippi. During their two-year stay this organization has served over 550,000 hot meals, hosted over 24,000 individual volunteers, and through an astonishing 1.4 million man-hours of volunteer service, they have rebuilt approximately 600 homes. Their volunteers have come from small churches in towns like Spruce Pine and Franklin and they have come from large congregations like Biltmore Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, a church whose members have comprised thirty-three teams of volunteers on mission in South Mississippi. Whether men or women, teenagers or senior adults, the volunteers from North Carolina have been the quintessential example of God’s people fulfilling the Second Commandment. Through their labors the North Carolina Baptist Men have more than fulfilled the admonition of Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

A STORY OF PEOPLE RESPONDING TO LOVE

The story of Hurricane Katrina is not a story of residential destruction, devastated communities, the painful loss of personal possessions or the heartache of lives disrupted by winds and water. Ultimately, the story of Katrina is the story of people responding to love. It is the story of volunteers, thousands volunteers, responding to the love of Jesus; a love so powerful it has transformed their lives to the point of sacrifice. They sacrifice their time,

money, vacation leave and personal energy to race from all over the nation to aid complete strangers. And why do they volunteer? Because Jesus modeled His teaching to “love your neighbor as yourself” as He sacrificed His life for them, His sacrifice leads them to sacrifice. Jesus’ love for them and their love for Jesus gives birth to their love for us, neighbors in need.

The story of Katrina is also a story of a community responding to the love of Christ. With each act of kindness, each labor of love, each hug, each encouraging word, each roof replaced, each home rebuilt, each Gospel witness, the “volunteers of Katrina” are validating the life-transforming message of Jesus. Their actions proclaim a loud message of love, a message that is both seen and heard daily in the neighborhoods of Gulfport. Lives transformed by the love of Christ are attracting lives that need a transforming touch of the love of Christ. Ultimately, that is the story of Hurricane Katrina.