

“PARADISE BUILT IN HELL”

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1st Corinthians 13:1-13

*“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.”
(I Cor 13:12a)*

About a week ago, I posted on Facebook, “Moving is hell.” And I will stand by that statement! ;)

But when you read a statement like my sermon title, “Paradise Built in Hell”, you’re probably not thinking of packing boxes, moving trucks, and chaotic disruption from one habitable residence into another.

Perhaps you’re thinking of one of the most common Protestant definitions of hell — that Hell is simply the absence of God.

But those in Haiti’s earthquake ravaged landscape, or those along the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, or those in the great Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, might think a little more concretely about hell. Hell for someone affected by those disasters might be the loss of a parent or child, a sibling or spouse. Hell might be seeing one’s home and belongings washed away and swept into the grand debris that still – STILL – litters the Gulf Coast. Hell might be the agony of enduring injuries while waiting for medical help. Hell might be watching your toddler dehydrate or perhaps starve.

And that is the kind of Hell that author and activist Rebecca Solnit speaks of in her book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*.

So what, then, is paradise? Perhaps our two most common referents for paradise are advertisements for tropical vacations . . . and, at the far end of the spectrum, Jesus’ words on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

But what author Solnit identifies as paradise is more like what Paul envisioned in the beloved words of I Corinthians 13. We have hints of paradise when communities live within these guidelines of love . . . patience, understanding, forbearance, and so on. (And, by the way, I Corinthians 13 was never intended as a wedding homily. Its target audience was the fairly dysfunctional congregation at Corinth.)

Now back to Solnit’s book. Unfortunately, I have not been able to put my hands on my copy, even after rifling through at least a dozen boxes of books . . . that would be in my own personal “hell” of the move. So I’m relying on the interview I heard her give with Amy Goodman last August. What drew me to this book is that it chronicles not only the crimes of the vigilantes and the powerful during Katrina, but also raises up the numerous instances of altruism, generosity and courage that were displayed by the vast majority of people who lived through that catastrophe.

I’m sure many of you here could reflect on moments in your own life when you received this sort of kindness and generosity during your own private hellish experiences . . . times when you were estranged, or had lost a loved one, or felt all alone in your first college dorm room or apartment in a strange city.

Perhaps the reason this book’s images struck me so vividly as I watched the rescue efforts in Haiti was that I, too, was the recipient of kindnesses without number . . . folk moving heavy furniture and boxes at my direction, bringing me meals, leaving my favorite foods in the fridge to greet my arrival, dusting and painting and sewing.

There is no monetary equivalent for that kind of help, just as those who have flown to Haiti to share their medical skills or their experience in organizing disaster relief could not ever put a dollar value on their time and energy.

Of her investigative reporting about Katrina, Solnit says this, “You know, I think one of the important things to keep in mind is that the great majority of people behaved really well, that I was trying to write the counter-story to the story that most people heard in the beginning, which was about large groups of marauding hordes reverting to barbarism and savagery and violence and whatever. And I went to New Orleans to look at what really happened, which was an enormous amount of volunteerism, resourcefulness, altruism, generosity, heroism, on the part of the people who were stranded, on the part of the people who came in as volunteers and rescuers.”¹

Interestingly, I heard similar but more assertive comments at the beginning of the Haitian disaster. I don’t remember the speaker’s name, but she has studied similar situations as a college professor and member of a disaster-response team. Her words underlined those of Solnit — that looting is often exaggerated; that there is a difference in looting for electronics and other potential black-market items and in seeking food when one’s children are starving. This has sensitized me to be attuned to every news report. The on-site reporter usually describes lives saved by emotionally drained locals and international workers – whereupon the interviewer frequently asks, “has there been looting?” The looting aspect is part of our apparent hunger for sensationalism, bigotry, and fear-mongering in the media. Although the racial aspect of it may be subtle, if you read the retrospectives of Katrina, for instance, it can be unmasked.

So what is this paradise, and what is meant by it is “built” out of hell? Again, quoting Solnik, “in most disasters, people do behave altruistically, resourcefully. They improvise communities. And they often find in that a real sense of joy. You see that in the 1906 earthquake. You saw that in 9/11. You see that in Katrina. And essentially, the normal roles and boundaries that confine people are removed, and it’s absolutely necessary that people connect with each other, that they make strong decisions, that they take care of each other. And that’s what they do.” (Think of the communities formed in Flight 93 over Pennsylvania on 9/11, and among the passengers in the Christmas Day attack on a North-west flight into Detroit.”

She continues, “One of the tragedies of New Orleans is that, because of the stereotypes that turn into rumors, and then turn into media reports, people believed that ordinary human beings were savages and were behaving barbarically. The truth of the matter is, even inside the Convention Center, even in the worst places, people were taking care of each other. People were improvising all kinds of communities in the school rooms and other places where they took refuge. And New Orleans, since then, has had hundreds of thousands of volunteers come in to work with the people of New Orleans. And for me, that’s the big story. And demographically, it’s much, much bigger. You’re talking about hundreds of thousands of people. And the minority who behaved terribly matter, but it’s important to keep the perspective that this is not how most people behave. This is indeed a minority.”

Solnit continues her critique, beginning with how she got involved in studying events as disparate as the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, the 1917 explosion that tore up Halifax, Nova Scotia, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, 9/11, and Katrina:

“You know, a lot of my work has been based on the field of disaster sociology, which emerged after World War II, when the US government decided it wanted to know how human beings would behave in the aftermath of an all-out nuclear war. The assumption, as it often is, is that we would become childlike and sheepish and panic and be helpless, or that we’d become sort of venal and savage and barbaric. And the disaster scholars started to

look at this and eventually dismantled almost every stereotype we have and found that people are actually, as I've been saying, resourceful, altruistic, brave, innovative and often oddly joyful, because a lot of the alienation and isolation of everyday life is removed. And, you know, you saw that in the 1906 earthquake, which I studied a lot for the centennial a few years ago, that people created these community kitchens, that they were extremely resourceful and helpful. And you see that all through. You see that in Mexico City. You saw that in 9/11.

“What you also see is that because the authorities think that we're monsters, they themselves panic and become the monsters in disaster. Some of the sociologists I worked with . . . call this “elite panic,” and that's the panic that matters in disasters, the sense that things are out of control; we have to get them back in control, whether that means shooting civilians suspected of stealing things, whether that means focusing on control and weapons as a response, rather than on help and support or just letting people do what they already are doing magnificently. And so, it really upends not only the sense of what happens in disaster, in these extreme moments, but I think it upends our sense of human nature, who most of us are and who we want to be. There's enormous possibility in disaster to see how much people want to be members of a stronger society, to be better connected, to have meaningful work, how much everyday life prevents that. “

One of the reviewers of her book observes that, “the ruptured earth [in an earthquake] creates a parallel breach in normal priorities that lead to a strange elation among residents. Everyday worries ceased to matter, if only temporarily, . . . “the long-term perspective from which so much dissatisfaction and desire comes was shaken too: life, meaning, and value were closer to home, in the present.” . . . the deep vein of benevolence, unselfish charity, and equanimity that Solnit discovered are all characteristics that contribute to what William James called the “civic temper.”

“There is Anna Amelia Holshouser, who set up a soup kitchen in Golden Gate Park three days after the 1906 quake and eventually served food to thousands of strangers. There is Vincent Coleman, a Halifax train dispatcher who lost his life rushing back to a telegraph office to warn incoming trains not to proceed. There are the hundreds of people who volunteered to escort through New York City nervous Arab American women and children in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks. And many commentators marveled at the decline of partisan bickering in the first few weeks after September 11.”

Love is patient and kind, never boastful or arrogant or rude.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

If I do not have love, I am nothing.

It's widely acknowledged that an estimated 1,400 people in New Orleans died in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And yet people are still traveling to the Gulf Coast, as the group I accompanied 3 of the last 4 summers. They go to share love with those who continue in a kind of hell-on-earth.

The Haitian earthquake caused an estimated 250,000 fatalities. And yet, people will soon tire of the news coverage, but stalwart volunteers will continue to go, to do, to listen, to love.

Here in Bordentown, we have our own smaller-scale disasters. There are people out of work, people in despair, people imprisoned by bigotry and an arrogant kind of pseudo-love.

Here in First Presbyterian Church, where you speak of “The Need to Feed”, community forms — not only in this sanctuary, but in the adult class, among those committed to delivering Bread of Life Mission Meals, even in

the Session and Board of Deacons. We don't have to wait for disaster to strike in order to seek Paul's vision of the beloved community. Disaster just gives us a boost, by removing the veneer of superficial differences and concerns.

If we maintain those walls of difference, if we seek our own benefit apart from the good of the community, perhaps we are already in a kind of living hell. Hell, then, is a place where hope is unknown and love is a stranger.

Let me remind you that our concern is never success. Our concern is faithfulness. In this we can see the flaw in Bill O'Reilly's observation on the futility of helping Haiti when he said, "Once again, we will do more than anyone else on the planet, and one year from today Haiti will be just as bad as it is right now."

Our concern is the same as that of Jesus, who came to free the oppressed and speak good news to the poor. This reveals the lie in statements like that of South Carolina's Lt. Gov, Andre Bauer, who said: "My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed! You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that."

No matter how tempting it may be to succumb to worldly logic, sit back, and forget Jesus' words, we are called, each one of us, to further the good of the community, the health of each child of God, and to act on "The Need to Feed." Only then will we be able to show visions of paradise, as through a glass darkly, until God's love is fulfilled and we see face-to-face.

ENDNOTES

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1. http://www.democracynow.org/2009/8/31/a_paradise_built_in_hell_rebecca