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**“Why Mardi Gras Matters”**

Rev. Julie Kain

After the storm I was told that when people would see their neighbors or their friends or coworkers for the first time, they'd ask, "How'd you do?" This exchange is still happening five and a half months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf coast region. Many of us in sunny San Diego and other parts of the country have moved on from the dramatic and shocking headlines and images of those first few horrendous weeks, but the thousands upon thousands upon thousands of folks living or trying to return to the affected region are still just barely getting started. About one-third of North Shore UU Church in Lacombe, Louisiana where I visited for two weeks in January have left and it is uncertain whether or not they will return. About a third of the congregation was fortunate to sustain little or no damage, although many of those folks have been left with a sense of survivor guilt. The new church building at North Shore had its roof repaired early on and the big trees that fell on its beautiful campus have been addressed, but there is still a third of the congregation of about 100 people who are actively struggling to respond to the damage their homes received. Some are doing this while living in FEMA trailers. Some are still waiting and hoping they might get one. A woman at the church has a friend who actually has been sleeping on his kitchen counter. Can you imagine?

The church property at North Shore is right off the highway near the tiny town of Lacombe which is between the larger towns of Slidell, Mandeville, and Covington. These are the communities of the Greater New Orleans Area, home to many people who commute to New Orleans everyday over one of two bridges that cross Lake Ponchartraine which serves as the top border of the city of New Orleans. The causeway is twenty-three miles long that connects the city with those North Shore communities, which were fortunate to be on higher ground but still received severe damages. Perhaps because of its central location in relation to these North Shore communities the church has a new neighbor since the hurricanes. A FEMA staging area was set up on a large lot a short distance from the beautiful church campus which proudly displays a large and elegant garden between its entrance and the main church building. The FEMA station is impossible to miss as it's full of stark white trailers and has round the clock security. This means there are guards posted at the entryway and at night streetlights similar to what you'd see at large malls except much brighter stick out like a sore thumb in the rural area and can be seen from afar. There is a strange and surreal feeling about the FEMA station and the constant traffic of trailers going in and out. I've thought many times, we shouldn't forget how fortunate we are to live in a country where we can eventually, and unfortunately in too many cases much too late, provide resources to respond to the enormous needs presented by this country's greatest natural disaster.

The presence of FEMA there at the turn that goes to North Shore UU felt to me a little like a futuristic Orwellian Big Brother, stark and impersonal under its blaring lights. The tensions around security at these kinds of places has dissipated some since the earlier days of the fall but there continues to be a militaristic feel to much of the

formalized relief efforts. One North Shore church member volunteered with the Red Cross at a station handing out food cards. She was dismayed that the lines to get in were there all through the night and that in addition to requiring proper identification, some of which was lost or left behind, the tables of volunteers were supposedly being protected by members of the National Guard. Perhaps a reactionary display in contrast to the chaos we witnessed through the media in the flooded downtown streets of New Orleans those first few days. I was struck by some post-Katrina artwork displayed by a woman artist from New Orleans. They were modern Southern primitives with scenes of houses with some damage and float-sized alligators with blue tarp banners inscribed with messages like, "FEMA be my Momma and Daddy." I truly believe that the arts and the cultural traditions rooted in this incredible region will play an important vital role in helping these people recover from the overwhelming challenges ahead of them.

The immediate area around North Shore Church is mainly rural. As you are out and about there is a slower pace to everyday life that can be felt and many of the people you'd meet are just like the people you'd meet anywhere. But just below the surface everywhere and very visibly in some places it is obvious that these folks are wrestling with an incredible disruption of their personal lives and in their communities. The extent of the hurricane damage can be seen in swabs of destruction that alternate with areas with much less visible damage. Your eyes are constantly drawn to the varieties of destruction in the landscape and there are many sights that visibly stand out as disturbing. Another of those is on the other side of the highway from the church and its brightly lit neighbor, the FEMA station. This is a large, corner lot that also has a constant train of trucks going in and out. It's a brand new and already very full landfill for the huge amount of natural debris created by the storm. The mound of trees grows visibly larger everyday. It's amazing how people are coping, like the guy who sleeps on his kitchen counter. A number of people have said to me both from the region and after visiting there that in fact the people are amazing, amazing in their spirit of resilience to cope and maintain their love for their homes, their communities and their state.

Louisiana has a fascinating history in and of itself. Some people have even said that when you go there it is like visiting another country because of its unique blend of cultures. I must say it's the only place I've ever been where even the Japanese waitress in the Japanese restaurant calls me "Baby" when clearing my plate. Saying, "You're welcome, Baby." If you've been there you probably know what I mean by the distinctive southern hospitality of Louisiana. You may also be asking what I was doing at a Japanese restaurant when there is all that wonderful regional food, like *ettouffes*, *po'boys* and *jambalaya*. Don't worry, I love that stuff and I had plenty of it, too. I actually love a lot of things about Louisiana culture and I whole-heartedly agree with one of North Shore's longtime members who has been in the area for over 20 years after she grew up in the Northeast. She said that even though she has been tempted to leave because the place is in such a big mess, she cannot bring herself to do it because the people really are so amazing. I think it is the appealing social quality epitomized by the Cajun expression *laissez les bon temps roulez*, let the good times roll. These folks have a relaxed attitude about life and a strong set of community traditions

that keep their social fabric strong despite the current adversity. Going back to that introductory phrase, “How’d you do?” Here are a some of the typical responses that might help show you what I mean. People might say, “Well, I lost a few trees,” or “Well, I have a blue roof now.” You might also hear, “Just a couple of inches of water.” Compare that to some folks who happen to live within the hour it takes to drive to the Mississippi gulf coast which got pummeled with waves of up to 35 feet. As the brunt of the storm went into smaller and smaller areas, these folks actually responded to the question of “How’d you do?” with “I only had a few feet of water.” Can you imagine? Can you imagine what a home smells like after only two inches of standing water? I’ll spare you the refrigerator story since we haven’t had lunch yet. Can you imagine your yard full of debris mainly from trees but also with bits of clothing. “Sometimes it feels like we are living in a garbage heap,” some people say.

On the first day of my visit, I met Meg, a North Shore church member, and the crew who was staying in her home and helping her family by moving large amounts of debris which were piled in her yard and up against her house to the curb for pickup. Meg’s home had flooding on the first floor so the whole crew and family were on the second floor, about a dozen people in all. The crew was a group of college students from another of North Shore’s partner churches in Massachusetts along with their intern minister. The group was spending a week of their winter break helping out and learning as much as they could to take back to their communities. Meg suggested that we keep sending cleanup crews to help people dig out from under the rubble surrounding their homes. She said it’s really hard to get on with your life when you feel like you’re covered with debris, but once you’re out it’s like you can breathe again. All of the people I met were so deeply appreciative of volunteers who have come from all over to help. Cleanup crews will continue to be needed in the next phase of demolition before rebuilding can take place will require many, many volunteers.

Can you imagine returning to your home or your church meeting hall and finding a dark brown ring around the entire wall up near the ceiling? This is what I saw at the UU Community Church in the New Orleans neighborhood of Lakeview, one of the neighborhoods hardest hit after the levees broke. As we drove from neighborhood to neighborhood we watched for that brown ring circling the outside of the buildings too to see the different water levels in each of the neighborhoods. These homes were also marked with spray paint graffiti left by rescue workers with the dates they were there and what they found in terms of people and pets, dead or alive. Can you imagine seeing one of these homes with a hole in the roof that was not made by the storm but by someone trying to get out from the inside? Yes, it’s a harsh landscape that the hurricanes left and still surrounds the gulf coast communities. I accompanied the group visiting from Massachusetts when the church member from North Shore, Meg, took us to see some of those areas hit hardest by the brunt of the storm along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, just an hour from Lacombe. We drove to the end of the road where there used to be a bridge taking you a short distance across the gulf there. Now what remains is only a skeleton of a bridge. I wondered where all those chunks of concrete and steel had gone. We drove on the roads along the coast there that were still passable. Many portions were closed. What we were able to see was simply unbelievable. Only the

places where homes once stood, with a few remaining items that weren't blown away, such those neighborhood signs that say, "Drive slow, we love our children". I was wondering how the young people were reacting to what they were seeing when one young man said, "It's apocalyptic," and nothing more was said. As the sun went down into a stunning sunset on the gulf and with a full moon rising behind us the kids asked to stop so they could walk in the sand and put their feet in the water. I walked up to where the houses had been instead. On front steps that led to no house was a strange collection of small items salvaged from the rubble, most of them broken. It did feel like, at that moment, we were poised at the end of the world. Unfortunately, there are times in the lives of many of us when a huge force of nature sweeps through and leaves us humbled in our defenselessness. Maybe it's the catastrophic event of cancer in a loved one or within our own bodies. Maybe it's the loss of a job or a marriage, or the tragic death of a beloved child. We are left feeling stripped away and exposed without the usual resources to protect ourselves.

I'm sure you heard some of the outrageous comments made by prominent people about God casting judgment through the hurricanes on the people of the gulf coast. Perhaps you heard about the Alabama state senator who said that the gambling, sin, and wickedness of the Gulf Coast brought the judgment of God. Or maybe you heard about the famous tv evangelist who blames Ellen Degeneres for God sending the hurricanes into New Orleans because she was born there and it's God's judgment on the all gay and lesbian people in New Orleans. Even a congressman from Louisiana mentioned that God cleaned up the public housing problem because they hadn't gotten around to doing it right. And then, there is the New Orleans mayor who got himself into hot water more than once while speaking to a predominantly black audience on the recent King holiday. Even he said that God was punishing black people in New Orleans for their violent infighting. I'm horrified to hear such comments. I deeply regret that hurting people will look to these kinds of leaders to provide answers to their heartfelt questions of why such tragedy occurs. And yet, there is something that I know about our human nature. When we are feeling overwhelmed by catastrophic events, we don't have to believe in God to ask from the depth of our being, "What did I do to deserve this?" Sometimes in our desperate attempts to cope we internalize responsibility for circumstances that are clearly out of our control. We feel the world as we've known it has come to an end and it feels like a destructive path was aimed right at us. In the long haul of recovery in the gulf coast we need to remember our brothers and sisters who have sustained not only a tremendous physical blow but a deeply spiritual and psychological one as well. At least we are seeing with the 600 page House report that is coming out that the administration, including homeland security, are being held accountable for their actual and tragic failure of responsibility in this situation. A little bit of justice.

People need to keep telling their stories and we need to keep listening. We need to not forget the daily struggles of the good people of the south. We need to not forget the stories of the people we have met either in person or through the media. We will keep sending resources to the region. We'll send money, as we are doing today, and more

people will continue to volunteer their time and services. There is plenty of work to be done and we are mobilizing to do it.

Meanwhile, in the state of Louisiana it is Carnival time and I heard many people say they needed to celebrate these weeks leading up to Mardi Gras more than ever. The early French settlers brought the holiday of Mardi Gras to the banks of the Mississippi. In France it is only celebrated on that one day of Fat Tuesday preceding the beginning of lent on Ash Wednesday, but over the decades and the centuries the mixed cultures of Louisiana have extended the celebrations so the season officially starts on January 6, the twelfth night after Christmas, and will culminate this year on February 28, Mardi Gras. I happened to be in Louisiana to see the launching of the season and I can tell you, it's not just in New Orleans but all the communities surrounding, the Mardi Gras season of carnivals is as big as Christmas and Easter. Colorful decorations abound in the official colors of the season: purple for justice, green for faith, and gold for power. Parties are held to raise money and mobilize for the various parades and street celebrations that take place all over. Many of those are hosted by Mutual Aide societies. People of all ages and lots and lots of families gather to join in the festivities, not just the more risqué rituals that we associate with the French Quarter and Bourbon Street.

On the day before I left to come back to California I was please to see the First UU Church in New Orleans was starting to get a new roof and proudly displayed on their wooden entrance doors was a Mardi Gras wreath hanging right over the water lines that were left by the flood. It's the spirit of the people. This year Mardi Gras is a much needed cultural and spiritual revival for the whole community. It's not merely an opportunity for a resilient people to laugh and play in spite of their adversities, it's a collective affirmation of the many blessings that fuel their determination to rebuild. The celebrations of Mardi Gras bring healing and an affirmation of life, showing to the whole world that this tragedy will not take away the soul, or destroy the culture, or break the spirit of these proud people of the south.

May it be so.