

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, September 10, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

This seems to be the weekend that we are remembering, remembering so many disasters. We just recently as a country are recovering from all that has happened down in New Orleans. We are remembering what happened four years ago. Some of the events that have happened, like New Orleans, we look at and we wonder why. We wonder how such things could have happened. Why didn't we have perhaps better warning, why didn't we have better plans to evacuate folks? Why did levees break? Lots of questions, lots of sadness and anger because of those events. Which perhaps then brings up all the sadness and anger and questions that we had four years ago. Many of us I'm sure can remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard news. The events of four years ago were not as the events of two weeks ago. They were not what we would deem a natural disaster, no they were four years ago, Human inspired disasters. But still, still we have those questions. Why did these things happen? Why are so many dead? Where was God in all of this? We are reminded again, as we, I don't want to say celebrate, but remember perhaps this anniversary, to what extremes some individuals will go in support of their own ideology, in support of their faith system, or of their ethnic heritage.

Some have claimed what those individuals four years ago did they did because of their religion. While they may have committed those acts because of their religion, I believe that they distorted the beliefs of their religion to justify their own deeds. And yet, they would have not been the first ones, nor will they unfortunately be the last to do horrendous deeds in the name of religion.

We can remember names like Saviarou, Auchwitz, The Inquisition, The Crusades, where atrocities have been committed in the name of religion. Atrocities can sometimes as well be committed in what we might say the name of survival. I think we can understand those down in New Orleans who broke into grocery stores to get food in order to feed themselves or their families. Perhaps you like me have difficulty understanding though, how those who broke into stores to steal electronics has anything to do with learning how to serve or getting along in a flood emergency.

Human beings can act with amazing generosity and astounding depravity. We were reminded of that as well in our lesson tonight from Genesis. What we heard read from Genesis 50 is the culmination of the Joseph saga. Joseph the best loved of the twelve sons of Jacob. Jacob, who loved Joseph best, he made him that wonderful robe. And Joseph, though, was not necessarily the brightest boy. He went around telling his brothers about these dreams that he had. These dreams where they were bowing down to him, where they were acknowledging him as their ruler. And so ten of the brothers turn on Joseph. They first seek to kill him but instead change their mind. They instead sell him off into slavery thinking that would be even more degrading to him. But in slavery Joseph quickly rises

through the ranks to become the over-seer of his Master's house, until he is falsely accused of rape. He's thrown into prison where he fairly quickly is put in charge of all of the inmates there in the prison. While there he helps a ranking official who promptly forgets Joseph once that official is released from prison until Joseph's particular skill in dreams is needed.

Once Joseph is released, he becomes second only to the Pharaoh, the king of all Egypt. And it is during that time, being second in command of the entire country that our scripture from tonight takes place. His brothers, those same brothers that threw him down a well and sold him into slavery are now before him. They don't recognize him, but they are before him. Begging not only food for their father, but for they're very lives for they have been accused falsely of stealing. How would we react? How would I react if I were in that position to have the power to condemn those who sought my life? But who was to blame? The brothers who were jealous or Joseph who went out of his way to tell his brothers how they were going to be his followers. Who is to blame?

Perhaps those are the questions that are still floating around in our own minds. Who is to blame about New Orleans? Who is to blame about the towers and the Pentagon and Somerset County? Myriad people can, I suppose, be blamed for what happened in New Orleans. The local government who had the evacuation plan of check on your neighbors before you head out of town, the state which didn't have the resources to respond, the national government that appears to be clueless as to what was happening. It might be simple to say four years away from the fact that well it was just those nineteen men who were responsible, or it's their religion who was responsible or some other excuse. The ethnic heritage of the people who did that, rather than looking at the cycles of poverty and starvation that so many countries endure, while we here enjoy, enjoy our excess almost. Perhaps we are filled with anger. Perhaps even stronger emotions, disgust, hatred, despair, but those emotions won't help us, nor will they help those in need.

Paul in the words to the Romans tonight reminded us not to pass judgement on each other. He said in Verse 10: Why do you pass judgement on your brothers and sisters? Or you, why do you despise a brother or sister? We all stand before the judgement seat of God. Rather, Paul reminds us: Do we do not live for ourselves and we do not die for ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die we die to the Lord, and so then whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's.

In these disasters and these atrocities, and these tragedies that we remember this weekend, we may well hear, where was God? In interviews with some survivors, I heard several of them say well God was with me as we got through this. I could feel God guiding me through this. But then that makes me think, if that's true, then where was God with all the people who died? Why did these things happen? Did God cause the breaking of the levees? Did God cause the crashing of airplanes? I would say that we live in an imperfect world. A world where bad stuff happens. God doesn't cause that bad stuff, let me say that again, God does not cause that bad stuff. We call that "bad stuff" sin. I would argue very strongly that it is because of this sin, because we live in this imperfect world that these tragedies happen.

Because we live in an imperfect world, yet in that imperfection, in our sinfulness, God is with us.

As God was with Joseph in Egypt, as Paul reminds the Romans that God is with them in all that they are doing, God is with us here, as God was there with all of those suffering in New Orleans. As God was with those on the airplanes and on the ground. We live in an imperfect world where bad things happen because of sin. And while that sin might cause us anger, or pain, or suffering or even hatred, yet we as believers are called to a better way.

Michael Henderson wrote about a World War II French woman named, Irène Laure, who attended the 1947 conference on reconciliation for the Second World War. He writes, "Irene had been in the resistance when the Germans occupied her country during World War II. Her son had been tortured, her comrades executed. At the end of the war she wanted Germany wiped from the face of the earth. She became a member of the parliament and leader of the Socialist women. She was invited to the Swiss conference and was horrified to find Germans there. She was challenged with the question: How can you rebuild Europe without the Germans? She retired to her room and for several days and nights thought about whether she would give up her hatred for the sake of a new Europe. When she came out, she asked if she could speak, and she did so. She turned to the Germans there in the hall and said, "Please forgive me my hatred." "A German woman came up from the hall and took her hand. Irène said it felt like 100 kilos being lifted from her shoulders. She went to Germany and repeated her apology, and everywhere she went Germans were willing, as a result, to face up to their past for the first time. "In hatred, Irène came to believe there were always the seeds for a future war."

Semoyn Frank wrote of a similar frame of mind: "No bombs, not even atomic bombs, none of the cruelties of war cause so much destruction of normal conditions of life or are the cause of so much ruin and evil as the spirit of hatred." These examples serve to remind us like Joseph to respond not with hatred, not with anger, but to respond with Love. These examples, I hope, cause us to remember the words of Paul, "If we live we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord." We remember these words so that THIS WEEKEND, this particular weekend, we might go forth as witnesses not of anger, not of destruction, not of hatred, but that we might go forth as witness of God's grace, of God's love, of God's forgiveness. So that we like Joseph might fulfill those words of Paul and bring of God, bring the witness of Christ not only to those around us but to those in need wherever they are so that in all that we do we can work together to BE the body of Christ here on earth.

Amen.