

July 25, 2010

Luke 11:1-13

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Last Sunday you heard some of what happened on our trip to Mississippi to help with Katrina Recovery. You heard from the 11 other members of the team, but you didn't hear much from me.

So this week is my turn. I have a somewhat different perspective than the others for three reasons.

First, I had been there before. Just over four years ago, only 8 months after Katrina. I had seen it when the recovery was really just beginning.

And second, I am a pastor, trained to see things theologically, from a “God-point of view”, from a perspective that tries to make sense and meaning.

And there’s a third reason----I wasn’t actively working. I couldn’t climb up on the roof or the scaffolding. I couldn’t drill or cut the siding or install the insulation. I could paint, but only a little. I couldn’t fetch or carry things.

And so, as I sat, I had time to consider what was happening, time to reflect, and mostly just time to observe.

And in all this observation I noticed a lot of things----the amazing way this team worked together, the fact that I never heard anyone whine or complain. I could tell when people needed a water break or to rest a minute.

I saw how much work got done and how people were eager to learn whatever it took to get it done.

I saw frustration at times. Impatience only a few times. Even disappointment now and then.

On Tuesday I saw the faces of the team as they met Mr. FL McKee for the first time. There was great joy in Pascagoula at that moment! Afterward the work was done even more carefully than before because what had been just a random act of kindness had become very personal.

The house we were working on had become more than just a house. It was someone's home.

Tuesday night we heard from Mr. McKee's case manager. She told us that when she got to the house she had found Mr. McKee alone in the back bedroom. He was on his knees, crying.

She told us she had gently asked him if he was okay, and he answered, "Miss Debbie, I have walls. I haven't had walls in three years!"

How grateful to have walls! Something we take for granted.

We hadn't built the walls, and we didn't get to drywall them. But we insulated them and now Mr. McKee will be comfortable in his home when he moves in sometime in September or October.

We have made a tremendous difference for one person who was a victim of the monster storm named Katrina.

As the week went on, I noticed many other things. The way the group got to know each other better. The way they enjoyed getting to know the team from Pennsylvania. The way that there was always someone eager to help me, which made the week possible for me.

Without those willing hearts and hands, I could not have been on the jobsite every day, and I certainly would not have had such a wonderful week.

But mainly I noticed a change in their eyes, a change that reflected a change in their hearts.

At the beginning of the week I read them a passage from the Book of Acts. The apostle Paul had a dream, a vision, in which a man from Macedonia spoke to him and said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

I related that to our call to go to Mississippi and asked them if they had heard the people saying, "Come over to Mississippi and help us." In fact, they had and that's why we were there.

I asked them to write down what they would say to the people of Mississippi if they could.

Their answers were what you might expect----- We are here to help. We want you to have hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. We care. We are here. God loves you. We have not forgotten you.

They wrote wonderful, generous, giving, loving answers that showed their open hearts and willing hands.

That was on Monday night.

It was all about helping others---unselfish and touching.

But what I saw in their eyes by the end of the week was something else.

In the acts of giving and helping, something else happened.

By being a blessing to others, they themselves were blessed. They gave love and in return they felt the love of God for themselves. At the end of the week they were physically tired, but spiritually they were full. They had helped to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it already exists in heaven. And what you heard last week is that their hearts were full and their spirits had grown.

Three weeks ago, as we prepared for Mission Mississippi, I preached on the same passage from Luke that I read today. Luke is recounting a time when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

In that sermon I talked about how we pray every week for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, and that we were going to Mississippi to put skin on that prayer, to work for it to be answered by being the hands and feet of Christ.

It's important to pray words, but if we are sincere in our prayers, sometimes we have to do something about it!

This morning I may be preaching from the same passage but my point is different.

When I consider the context of the disciples' request, this is what I notice.

The disciples had seen Jesus pray numerous times, both as a public prayer, in front of others, and they had also seen him go apart from the crowds to pray, talking to God in private. They saw the results of those prayers-----more strength, more assurance, more love.



Jesus would go apart to pray, exhausted and spiritually empty and he would come back filled up and strong, ready to continue his ministry and service.

And so they wanted to know how to pray like that, to have that kind of a relationship with God, to be able to pray all night and be refreshed and renewed as the sun came up in the morning.

What they wanted, what they NEEDED, was spiritual growth---to grow in their personal relationship with God, to be able to talk to God in a way that wasn't just memorized or formulaic, but deep and real and honest.

And so Jesus began, "Our Father." The Jewish people avoided saying the name of God at all times, preferring the title Lord. To be so personal as to call God Father was shocking to the disciples, but it pointed the way to a more personal relationship, a huge step in spiritual growth for them!

There are many ways to grow spiritually. Prayer, Holy Communion, reading scripture, studying, covenant groups, even fasting.

But we cannot forget that one very important and effective way to grow spiritually is by performing acts of service.

By doing things like helping to rebuild a house that's owned by someone we don't even know.

And that's what I saw last week in Mississippi.

By helping Mr. FL McKee, people grew closer to each other, and they also grew closer to God.

Whether they recognized it or not, while they were working, they were praying. Every hit of the hammer, every turn of the drill, every nail picked up off the ground, every drop of paint put on the house

Was a prayer. A prayer to be Christ's hands and feet.

A prayer to provide a safe, comfortable house for someone else.

A prayer to be able to do more than they ever thought they could to make a difference in someone's life.

And God answered those prayers. And poured over those answers was the gift of God's amazing grace, the gift of the blessing of feeling God's presence and love.

Sometimes we find God in quiet stillness, alone, but sometimes we find God in action, in service, in noise and in each other!

After dinner one night last week, our site coordinator Jack asked us where we had seen God that day. We had seen him in each other, in the homeowner, in a number of things that we had done for each other.

I saw God all over the place last week, and pretty much continuously, in everything and everyone. When I was discouraged because I couldn't do everything I wanted to, because I couldn't be on the roof or up on the scaffold, I saw God when Mae came to bring me pencils to sharpen. I saw God in Nghia and Manny as they managed to get me up on the porch so I could get into the house.

I saw God when someone brought me cold water, when someone brought my backpack to me, when my wheelchair was pushed and when someone handed me my crutches or helped me get dinner.

I saw God when the entire team indulged me by letting me take them to Biloxi to find where I had worked in 2006.

God was very much with me in Mississippi.

When I broke my foot I heard from a number of people that “Sometimes God just wants you to rest.” But the desire of my heart was to go to Mississippi and so I went. I knew that going might mean that I was not letting my foot heal. I knew that I might be increasing the chances that I would need surgery to heal the broken bone.

But my heart would break if I couldn’t go to Mississippi and I chose to take those chances rather than for sure break my heart.

God answered my prayer in a more abundant way than I could ever imagine. The trip was unbelievable, everything I wanted it to be and then some. I was able to take care of my physical need to stay off my foot while my tired spirit was filled to overflowing.

And the icing on the cake came just this past Friday at the doctor when he told me that the bones were still in the right position, that they hadn't pulled apart, and that healing seems to be right on-track.

God is so good!

And so not only the rest of the team grew spiritually but I did, too. Jesus talked about the neighbor who needed bread in the middle of the night, who received what he needed because of his persistence. I persisted in following my heart to Mississippi and God answered all of my prayers.

Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened for you.

I asked for a team with willing hearts. I sought a way to be able to take them to Mississippi. I knocked, wanting to be able to go even with a broken foot.

What is it that you are asking for? What is the desire of your heart?

The great King David tells us that God will give us the desires of our hearts if we delight in the Lord. The desires of our hearts were put there by the Holy Spirit. Ask in confidence that God will give.

What are you seeking? What are you missing in your life? What is that you need that you can't quite find on your own? Meaning? Love? A place to belong?

Keep looking and you will find!

Knock on that door, the door to heaven. Just as a friend will open the door, just as a loving father will give good things to his children, so God will open the door, invite you inside, and bring you into his presence, with grace and with love.

Ask, Seek, knock! Familiar words. Sometimes so familiar that we overlook their impact on our lives.

Ask for God to show you the way to a closer relationship with him.

Seek the Kingdom of God by being willing to serve, by being Christ's hands and feet.

Knock by spending time in prayer and reading scripture and in fellowship with others.

God will open the door to you!

God is good all the time!

Amen.