

Throughout his ministry Jesus is guided to those who are in greatest need of his healing touch and loving words. Centuries before smartphones, Jesus demonstrates an unerring awareness of where the hurting people are and what they most desperately need. News about Jesus' powers and compassion spreads quickly, and soon crowds of desperate people, "*harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*" are flocking to him (Matthew 9:36). Yet even after he's become "Jesus Christ Superstar" in the eyes of the people, still he's grounded enough to stop and speak personally with the woman who touches the fringe of his robe (Luke 8:44), and to call up words of encouragement to Zacchaeus, the hated tax collector who's been treed by an angry mob (Luke 19:5).

Jesus is no mere collector of data. He's a hands-on healer and helper, a spiritual and material first responder. Jesus calls us to be first responders, too. Remember his question to Peter following his resurrection? "*Simon son of John, do you love me?*" "*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*" "*Then feed my lambs*" (John 21:15). As Jesus prepares to depart, his mission to the lost and lonely, the homeless and the hurting, remains more vital and more urgent than ever.

It's a simple commission: if you see a need, do something! If someone is hungry, feed them. If someone is thirsty, give them a drink. If someone is lonely, visit them. If someone is sick, care for them. If someone is naked, give them clothes. It really is that simple! But to do that effectively we must go where people are hurting.

The first response to a disaster is often a compassionate, rescuing response. Yet, after the floodwaters have subsided or the wildfire has burned itself out, another sort of response is called for: the preventive response. It does little good to rebuild homes on a floodplain if the new homes are not raised up high enough to withstand the next flood. After the store closes or the factory shuts down the first-response services of a food pantry may be much appreciated, but they're not a permanent solution to hunger.

There's a little parable attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. about a man relaxing beside a stream. He saw a badly injured man floating by, so he waded into the water and pulled the man out and bandaged his wounds. Then another wounded man floated by, and another. It became apparent that evil people upstream were beating and robbing these innocents and casting them into the stream. What is the most faithful response to such evil? Dr. King asked. To keep pulling the victims out of the water one by one and treating their wounds, or to hike upstream and fight the injustice?

Unlike Facebook's Disaster Maps, which rightly assume that hurricanes and earthquakes are forces of nature beyond our control, there are some human disasters Christ's church can and should directly address in the form of social action. In fact, Christians spearheaded many of the great social-reform movements over the past centuries.

The abolition of slavery would never have succeeded were it not for people of faith. England's William Wilberforce, a devout evangelical Christian, labored for decades to convince Parliament to ban slavery in the British Empire. So, too, did the Quakers and others who operated Underground Railroad stations. So, too, did Presbyterian minister Elijah Parish Lovejoy who died defending his printing press from an anti-slavery mob in Alton, Illinois.

The early 20th-century Prohibition movement is often dismissed as a failure because the constitutional ban on alcohol didn't last. In fact, the primary concern of this deeply religious movement was for the welfare of children and families with lives shattered by alcoholism. Although the ban on alcohol proved unsustainable, the movement led to permanent awareness of alcoholism as a pressing public-health problem.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s own civil rights movement is the most notable example in recent memory of people of faith rallying to fight social ills. Our own United Church of Christ was one of the earliest denominations to support Dr. King and to civil rights movement. In each of these cases, change occurred because people sought out people in need. They went to places of deep hurt and fought for permanent solutions. They stood up to be counted, placing their lives on the line, just as Jesus did so many years ago. Real change happened because real people confronted real needs.

Novelist and activist Elie Wiesel captured this prophetic imperative in these words from his December 10, 1986, acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize:

"As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them; that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours; that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*. The Spirit of the Lord has anointed *us* to servant ministry. So, go. Follow the disaster map. But when you get to the place of need, set your map aside, roll up your sleeves, get to work and labor as Jesus calls us to do.

We have the chance to do just that in our own community right now. At the annual meeting we started a conversation about how to support our federal employees (our neighbors) impacted by the government shutdown. Our first thought was to provide families with gift cards for groceries, but Federal regulations prohibit federal employees from accepting gifts valued over twenty dollars.¹

So, instead, to show support for all federal workers in our community we will be offering their families a meal at a local restaurant. On Monday, February 4th, federal employees and their families may dine out at one of the participating restaurants and Federated Church will pick up the check.

You can show your support for these neighbors by donating to the “Fergus for Feds” initiative. The average cost of a meal with a drink is \$15 per person² or \$60 for a family of four. Donations may be made by check to Federated Church with “feds” on the memo line, or with cash in one of the pew envelopes with “feds” written on the outside. All donations are tax deductible. This is not a permanent solution, of course, but it is a way to show support for families in our community who are impacted by the government shutdown.

Prayer for Good Government and a Blessing for Federal Employees: Lord of the universe and leader of your people, give wisdom to all those who exercise authority. Teach them to put the good of the many before the greed of the few. Help them to love truth and to hate falsehood and corruption, and, above all, urge them to remember that the one who would be greatest must learn to be the servant of all. We pray today for those federal employees who are impacted by the government shutdown. Bless them and their families and support them during this unsettled time. We’re grateful for their work on our behalf and pray they may soon return to it. May those who make decisions put their personal agendas and petty squabbles aside so that the work of our great nation may continue. We pray all this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹ <https://www2.oge.gov/Web/oge.nsf/Resources/Gifts+from+Outside+Sources>

Disaster Maps

January 27, 2019

Luke 4:14-21

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When disaster strikes, communication is critical to ensure that rescue personnel get aid to the right place. In a disaster like the Red River flood, or 9/11, or Hurricane Katrina, one of the greatest challenges for aid agencies is finding displaced people who need to be rescued. When phone lines are down, the few cell towers still operating easily get overwhelmed with voice calls. Even when voice calls do get through, the survivors placing them are often on the move. For rescue workers, knowing yesterday’s or even the last hour’s location is of little use.

But voice calls are not the only communications carried over cell towers. Many social-media users, such as Facebook customers, have location services. Mobile phones are constantly sending identifying signals to cell towers, and Facebook’s servers are triangulating the user’s location. Often, those tiny bits of data get through when voice calls do not.

Realizing the value of their location data to rescue workers, Facebook’s Data For Good Division implemented a service called Disaster Maps. During a disaster, Facebook aggregates the location data of all its customers near ground zero and reports overall trends to government agencies and NGOs coordinating the emergency response. Disaster Maps tells first-responders where the largest migrations of survivors are headed.

Embarking on his new ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus rolls out his own disaster map. Reading from the Isaiah scroll, he declares that the Holy Spirit has anointed him “*to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free*” and to proclaim God’s good news of salvation, announcing “*the year of the Lord’s favor*” (vv. 18-19).

² <https://www.thesimpledollar.com/dont-eat-out-as-often-188365/>