“The Sacred Acts: A Recap and Reflection”

Acts 1: 6-14

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It’s been ten years.

Ten years since Hurricane Katrina made her mark on the Gulf Coast.

Ten years since that natural disaster left communities tattered and torn.

This week has been filled with anniversary events, marking the date when Katrina hit.

A few presidents paid visits, the Mayor of New Orleans rallied volunteers, parades were held.

Everyone marveled at how much progress has been made while also lamenting how far they have yet to go.

I had the honor of go back there this week, 8 years after I left.

I had spent my first year out of college volunteering with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

My time was spent in Pearlington, Mississippi, a tiny town on the border of Mississippi and Louisiana.

Drive too fast down highway 90, and you’ll miss it.

A small sign on the side of the road is the only indication that there’s much there.

Before Katrina, Pearlington was home to roughly 1500 people.

After the storm, only 800 returned, and each year more and more people move away, realizing the impossible task of rebuilding their lives there.

This was ground zero of Hurricane Katrina.

The eye of the storm went right through Pearlington, destroying nearly every home its path.

Being a small town, it got overlooked by recovery efforts after the storm.

Most of the attention went to New Orleans, where the need was certainly great.

But many people don’t realize that more property damage was done in Mississippi than in the Big Easy.

Eventually more agencies like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance recognized the need in Pearlington and set up camp there.

I had the privilege of managing that camp for a year, and am still finding myself transformed by that experience.

A friend of mine whom I met during my time there organized a reunion of volunteers this week.

She wanted us to meet up and visit with the homeowners we worked with.

Despite the challenges of traveling with a baby, I knew I had to go.

It had been so long since I’d seen my fellow volunteers and the friends I made in Pearlington.

So, Abigail and I ventured there for just one night.

Neighbor Night.

Our camp had started a tradition of having Neighbor Night once a week.

It was an opportunity for volunteer teams to invite the owners of the homes they were working on to dinner.

We would fellowship at the table and share stories.

A lot of healing happened during those meals as residents of Pearlington retold their experience of Katrina.

For the reunion this week, organizing a Neighbor Night was our top priority.

We wanted to gather with those homeowners once again, and hear how things have been going since we last saw them.

So we partnered with our friends at the Missionary Baptist Church and made it happen.

It was a joy to see familiar faces and hear how they were doing all these years later.

One theme kept coming up over and over as the residents of Pearlington offered reflections on how Katrina impacted them.

They said over and over how grateful they were to the volunteers from churches who came in to help them recover.

When government funding and insurance money fell short, it was the churches from all over the nation and world who made recovery possible.

I can’t tell you how many times I heard people say “we never would have recovered if it hadn’t been for all the church groups.”

It is clear that the residents were blessed by the church volunteers.

But the blessings worked both ways.

Each person who did short term or long term volunteering after Katrina was transformed by the experience.

Each person was able to meet neighbors they might not have met otherwise and enjoyed hospitality from those neighbors.

Each person was able to see God’s work in progress as recovery and rebuilding occurred after the storm.

As I listened to the reflections of these residents, I couldn’t help but see the connection between the response of the church volunteers and the 7 sacred acts we’ve been exploring this summer.

It is clear that those who responded to the devastation of Katrina, were doing so out of a call rooted in these sacred acts we practice in the church.

The church folks who dedicated a week of their precious vacation time, did so as a response to their baptismal vows.

When they experienced the Spirit’s transformation in that water, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

Those who rode in a church van for hours and sometimes days to the Gulf Coast, did so as a response to the call Jesus gives at the Lord’s Supper.

When they experienced the Spirit’s transformation at the communion Table, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The youth groups who worked in the sweltering summer heat, did so as a response to the understanding they gained during their confirmation classes.

When they experienced new insight about the purpose of the church, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The Christians who mourned the sin of poverty and inequality experience by the people on the Gulf Coast, did so as a reaction to the weekly confession they make.

When they experienced God’s forgiveness and grace, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The compassionate souls who listened to the painful stories and prayed with people who lost everything, did so as a response to having been anointed when sick.

When they experienced God’s healing through anointing, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The men and women who poured their blood, sweat, and tears into rebuilding homes, did so as a response to the Holy Orders God had given them.

When they experienced God’s call to ministry, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The people who still maintain relationships with those they met after Katrina, do so as a response to the relationship model we see in marriage.

When they experienced God’s call to pursue healthy relationships like marriage, they were charged with the task of loving and serving their neighbors.

The thousands and thousands of church volunteers who responded to the need after Hurricane Katrina, did so as a response to the 7 sacred acts we practice here in the church.

They took their faith practice beyond Sunday morning and lived it out in response to a real need in the world.

As Christians, this is what our faith is all about.

Of course coming to Church on Sunday morning is important.

But we can’t let the transformation that manifests in this sanctuary, stay isolated in this sanctuary.

We’re called to go out into the world, with those 7 sacred actions in our tool belt, and let that transformation shine in all that we do.

Whether in our workplace, or in our homes, or in special opportunities to serve like the response after Katrina.

There are opportunities to love and serve our neighbors in every single context we find ourselves in.

Our task is to figure out how to put to use these 7 sacred actions outside the church walls.

We can’t be like those disciples in our scripture lesson for today.

The ones staring at the sky.

They were excited that Jesus had returned to them and they hoped he would stick around.

But before their eyes, he ascended to heaven, leaving them dumbfounded.

So the disciples stood there, looking toward heaven waiting for Jesus to return.

Suddenly two men, possibly angels, appear and say to them:

“What are you doing just standing there?

Quit lollygagging and get to work!

The Holy Spirit is about arrive and you’ve got a church to create!”

As Christians, we can’t just stand there, staring at the sky, waiting for Jesus to return.

We can’t be lollygaggers, relying on Jesus to come back and fix all of the problems of the world.

Because we are the ones called as the body of Christ to act.

We are called to love and serve our neighbors, seeking out ways that we can make the kingdom of God known in our midst.

Compelled by those 7 sacred acts, we’ve got all of the tools we need.

It’s just a matter of putting them to use.

So my challenge to you, as we wrap up this sermon series, is to think about how these 7 sacred acts might compel you to be different.

How might they give you motivation to go out to love and serve your neighbors?

I want to invite you, in the coming few weeks, to pick one of the seven sacred acts.

Feel free to take one of the bookmarks in the pews, if you need a reminder of what they are.

Pick one of the sacred acts and reflect on it.

Think about your experience with that sacred act.

How has it transformed you?

How do you see God at work in your life because of that sacred act?

What do you feel called to do in response to that sacred act?

Spend some time reflecting on this, and if you feel comfortable, share your reflection with someone else.

You’re welcome to share with me, or with a Session member, or with a neighbor.

Whomever you like.

My hope is that each of us will gain some new wisdom regarding God’s call up on our lives.

New insight into how we might better love and serve our neighbors.

The Kingdom of God is revealed when we allow these sacred acts to stir up our lives.

When we allow these sacred acts to transform us and change how we interact with the world.

Ultimately, these sacred acts compel us to love God and love our neighbor.

Living out our call as the Body of Christ.

Offering grace and love to a broken and fearful world.

May all that we do be rooted in these sacred acts.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.