

Ceramics
“Rise above it.”
II Corinthians 4:7-12

Last in the series, *Ups and Downs on the Emotional Roller Coaster*

Rev. John H. Hice
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Storms

A rising tide of ocean-borne oil. Scores with sand-skimmers face a never-ending cycle of waves carrying tar balls to the beach. Others endure hours of oil-sick air and heartache saving birds and sea turtles. All this stirs memories of Hurricane Katrina and its mostly unsung heroes.

I remember the story of Kiersta Kuretz-Burke, a physician who served as a rehabilitation specialist at Charity Hospital in New Orleans.¹ The healthiest patients in the hospital had been evacuated before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, leaving the patients in the most serious condition in the hospital. Power went out at 8:00 that Monday morning. The back up generator failed simultaneously. They were left with no food, water, or power. Many of Kiersta's patients who were respirator-dependent could not breathe. This meant that staff had to manually ventilate the patients: standing, squeezing the ventilation bags in rotating shifts since one could not continue for more than a half hour at a time before becoming fatigued.

They worked this way through day and night, thinking that someone would realize what was happening. But the chief medical officer of hospital was reported to have left in wake of the storm, leaving the rest of the staff without leadership, apparently nobody thought of them. There were two land lines open. That provided some telephone communication; so on Tuesday morning Kiersta was able to speak with her mother by phone. It was then that she realized that no one on the outside even knew they were there let alone what predicament they were in. She said, “Mom, you have to help. I have no idea what you can do, but help us.”

Kiersta's sister was living on West Coast, working for National Public Radio. So her sister and mother started calling everyone they could think of. This went on 4½ to 5 hours. By the end of the work day, they had finally reached FEMA and Homeland Security. Neither was aware of what was taking place in the hospitals until then. They

began to work on it and, according to a *New York Times* article, started evacuating patients at some of the hospitals that day.² The last part of the story I heard was on the following Sunday, when Kiersta and her colleagues were still at work in the hot, dark halls of the hospital, caring for their patients and eating Starbursts® from a vending machine.

Courage.

Then like now, scenes we watched on television were overwhelming. Then like now it was catastrophe striking Americans on our own shores: not at the hands of terrorists but by the force of the same environment that nurtures us and gives us life. Same place as before: many of you, like Laura and me, have vacationed there, have seen pictures of familiar places devastated or covered with tar balls and thought, “I was there!” Even people interviewed whose lives have been altered and businesses ruined look somehow familiar.

Yet, in both cases, it’s been the compassionate response of people both there and around the world that keeps coming through as the other story, overlaid and hopeful amidst chaos and despair. What of that, and what of God’s presence and power at work in it all?

The Face of Courage

Another time and another place, a missionary was at work in a hostile world. Look through the tales in The Acts of the Apostles; hear his own descriptions of the life he lived though his letters to the churches like this one to the Corinthians and you see something at work that is similar to Kiersta’s story. With the Gospel of Jesus Christ on his lips and a compassion for desperate people in his heart, he boarded ship, enduring waves and storms to bring them the peace of Christ. He stood up to those who would scourge him to an inch of his life, imprisonments, beatings, scorn and starvation. As I see it, all-the-while he was rising above those storms in his devotion to Jesus; in his the love for people.

And how did he understand it? In essence, he says in this passage, “I might sometimes be down, but I’m never out.” This is how he understood his experience. He said, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God.” The love of God was so strong within him that he

was compelled (perhaps the better word is *impelled*) to rise above his circumstance, whether it was caused by nature or human violence: rise above it and attend to the task at hand: caring for people, giving them the love of Christ.³

A treasure in a clay jar: the power comes from the contents rather than the ceramic pot. You and I are fragile and sometimes fearful: but when we know what blessing we carry, our very weakness can reveal the love of God we have. It gives us the stuff to rise above anything we face.

It's not always easy to rise above the storm; yet that is what courage does. Regardless your fears and angers no matter the overwhelming odds: rise above the storm. Keep your heart and your head about you: through it all, serve the Lord. That's what people like Kiersta have always done. It's what the workers today and tonight in boats and on beaches are doing as they face impossible odds. It's what you do when you pray for the environment and for the people, sacrifice to give relief, and step forward to say, "I want to help." In every case it's a matter of people rising above the storm. Ceramics containing a treasure.

Courage.

When you carry that kind of faith-full, rise-above-the-storm courage, you become a significant witness for God's love and the hope of Christ. Paul wrote that all the knocks he received pointed to Jesus' crucifixion; and whenever he acted to rise above it his life became a sign of the Resurrection, itself.⁴ So when you read about Paul, don't see a dreamer making the best out of a bad situation; see the victory of God over powers of destruction.

You might see victims of a catastrophe and say, "that's where God can be found" and you will be right. But look also at the heroes in the face of the wind rising up against the odds in grand, compassionate effort. God is also there, in all Christ's brokenness and all God's victorious glory; God is there.

Let this be an encouragement to you for everyday. Rise above the occasion: whether it is pressure to compromise values or an inner impulse to save your own skin while someone else sinks. Rise above the storm. It isn't easy; but when you step out to do it, I believe you let God accomplish in you that which is beyond your wildest dream.

When Everything is Said and Done

A lasting memory of the 2005 hurricane was simply two men in a boat. A news team caught up with them as they oared their way from a flooded neighborhood to the edge of dry land where they brought two older women they rescued from inundated homes. After convincing the news team to transport the women to a pick-up site, the two men shoved off, back into the neighborhood to find more of the stranded. Before leaving they spoke briefly to the news team. Though they were just as thirsty and exhausted, hot and hungry as the rest, they were smiling. As they left one said, "I suppose we'll be the last to be evacuated, but we won't go until there's no one left."⁵

Ceramics.

Treasure in clay jars.

Impelled.

They'd risen above the storm; weathered something that could remind you of Jesus' crucifixion so a sign of his Resurrection could shine like the sun! This might not have been fun. There was plenty for them to fear. But in the face of it they were happy.

Happy as those who know what courage is all about.

¹ Kiersta's story is told through her mother who worked at the Attorney General's Office in Lansing. It was conveyed to me by the parish nurse of the church I served at the time: Karen DeBenedet, who also worked at the AG Office.

² Reed Abelson and Alan Feuer "10,000 Patients and Staff Members Await Evacuation From Barely Functional Hospitals," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2005
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/01/national/nationalspecial/01hospital.html?adxnnl=1&oref=login&adxnlx=1125761201_uwElaQGXE7BHHigwJJPjw

³ J. Paul Sampley, "2 Corinthians Commentary." *New Interpreter's Bible vol XI*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. ©2000. pp 80-82.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *ABC News*. Special Report, Thursday, September 2, 2005, 10:00 pm.