

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson: 1/27/09
at Pilgrim Church for New Orleans Sunday

“Where Will You Stand?”

My Habitat for Humanity worksite supervisor in New Orleans was Stevie, a 23 year old volunteer from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a young woman with a can-do attitude and catlike movements as she walked with me across the roof trusses up on the third-floor of the house we worked on together for four days. One of the things I love about mission trips and this retreat from our cluttered and busy day to day lives is that you get to talk to folks a lot: while swinging a hammer or moving a ladder or waiting for the next roof truss to be hauled up. While putting together the roof I learned that Stevie was like lots of the other thousands of volunteers who have descended upon the Big Easy in the 29 months since Katrina hit and the city flooded. According to an August 2007 USA Today newspaper article, in the two-plus years since that awful week in August 2005, more than a half a million, 500,000 faith-based volunteers, have traveled to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to help rebuild. Baptists and Catholics, Jews and Muslims, Presbyterians and UCC'ers, a half a million strong. The week in March '05 that I first went to New Orleans there were 10,000 volunteers in the city. On the plane back home this year, our group met two other United Church of Christ groups: from a churches in Sterling, Massachusetts and New York City. The army of volunteers that has descended upon the Gulf Coast is the largest mobilization of disaster relief volunteers in US history, unprecedented modern times. But they come: idealistic recent college grads like Stevie, hopeful suburbanites like our Pilgrim Church crew: young and old, northerners, southerners, women and men, all, in the words of Stevie, just wanting to help, to make a difference, to respond with love and hope to the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States.

The profound effect that going to a still broken place like New Orleans has on me, on most, is this: it challenges us to consider: do we dare to still have hope in our often busted up and broken world? Do we dare to declare our optimism, idealism, a passionate belief that, with Jesus Christ empowering and inspiring us, through hard work and sacrifice, things will get better and not just in the Big Easy but in our nation, our world, our lives? New Orleans challenged me as any place or situation of despair always does to consider just where I spiritually stand in this universe. Will we hope in the face of hopelessness? Will we love even when the fatigue of so much left to do tires us out? Will we carry on seeking to mend God's fragile world, even as cynics scoff and the rest of the country seems to have forgotten our friends in the Crescent City?

Because when you drive around New Orleans—and see the tens of thousands of still mud-stained and empty homes—block after block after block; when you hear the tragic stories of the people who survived in attics for four days in 100 degree heat with no water, when no one came; when you bang up against the chronically dysfunctional government: local, state, national: the temptation always is to not have hope; to wonder can I really make a difference, just me, just our little group from Pilgrim Church?

Yes, yes! Because that is what it means to be a Christian and to follow in the footsteps of the Master Carpenter. To hope fiercely. To hope trusting God works through

us and all things for the good, always. To hope because hope is infectious. To hope because faith is always based not just in what we do, but in what God is doing through us, for the good, the right, for love. As the historian Howard Zinn wrote, "An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places--and there are so many--where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction."

So: thank God for the magnificent folks from Pilgrim Church and Cedar Rapids, Iowa and New York City and anywhere and everywhere who hope with God: for New Orleans, for this world. For with this God we can rebuild, and not just homes, but hope, one magnificent act of love at a time. Let all God's people of hope say, "Amen!"