

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “**Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?**”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “**Feed my lambs.**”

(John 21: 15)

Who, then, is the faithful and wise steward, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, “My master is staying away a long time,” and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 24: 45-51)

Fellow Servants

(Written from Joplin, Missouri)

The passages above are often used to preach sermons for believers in general, and rightly so because we all have work to do in the Kingdom of God. But this particular passage has a special emphasis for pastors and those who act in Jesus’ Name. God *does* call people into His service in the manner of a shepherd, taking care of a congregation, or offering the Good News of the Kingdom to those who need it. Nothing, however, reveals the motives of the heart like a crisis; much like what the people of Joplin, Missouri have endured in this last month.

A tornado, rated at F5 – the most powerful on the scale – ripped through the heart of this city in May, killing hundreds of people. A footpath of destruction miles long marks where the twister touched down. A Wal-Mart super center on Range Line Drive (Business U.S. 71) is one of 400 businesses that were almost literally erased from the face of the earth. Neighborhoods where some 8,000 homes and 9,000 cars were located are now great piles of rubble; owners surviving the storm have either pitched tents in front of the remains of their houses or were evacuated to two refugee centers nearby. Joplin High School on East 20th Street in the center of the footpath was destroyed, and school district officials scramble to make some arrangements for the upcoming school year. Clearing away the debris is going to take months, and is only the first step back for Joplin; full restoration will take at least a year, probably more.

Into this chaos came churches and faith-based ministries, large and small, private reconstruction companies, the federal government... and, one month after the tornado hit, Carolyn and I. (The school year had to end for me first, and I had some training to take for one of my classes.) We figured Carolyn could apply her counseling services and I could pick up stuff, swing a hammer, lift a box or do whatever needed done (even play the bagpipes if necessary) in addition to prayer and pastoral work.

Unfortunately, so also came opportunists and hustlers; we ran into one of the latter our first evening here, trying to get some money for a meal just blocks from where a local restaurant was *giving away* meals for victims, one of several in town that is doing so. We also found a place purportedly for the benefit of relief workers that supplies showers, laundry services, and other basic housekeeping activities... for a fee, of course. (Six-minute showers for five dollars!) The former can be explained, to paraphrase Pastor Tommy Bates of Independence, Kentucky, quite simply; they are still in their sin and are doing what comes naturally for them. The latter's fees for services are annoying (not to mention exorbitant), but I'm sure some will argue that they need to recoup their expenses in these matters. And while para-governmental agencies are definitely on the ground and working, volunteering with those groups has so many hoops you are required to jump through that by the time you have finally been approved, the crisis is practically over. (Sadly, the presence of the opportunists and hustlers in a disaster makes this necessary.)

So, where does this leave us? As in so many other cases, with the hands and feet of the Lord Jesus, the Body of Christ. Major national and international ministries are in town, but as we arrived – one month after the disaster -- we found them winding down their efforts or packing up to leave. Of course, we must remember that these groups operate mostly by donations, their resources are limited, and Joplin is not home to the only disaster area in the nation. Wildfires continue to burn in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas and (at the other end of the spectrum) many areas in the north are flooded; North Dakota and Montana spring to mind.

Local churches have really stepped up to the plate in disaster relief, doing what they can to help out. One of the larger ones, Forest Park Baptist Church on Range Line Drive, has set up a centralized area in their auxiliary parking lot where victims can get food and clothing, along with some non-essentials like toys for children. There is a facility for showers (at no charge) set up, and the first thing volunteers are usually asked is *When can you start?* Forest Park also was the host for one of the international ministries, but their own *Mission Joplin* (<http://missionjoplin.tv>) looks to be in for the long haul from all three of their campuses.

Where Carolyn and I have started, however, is – literally – right outside the door of our rig. The Shoal Creek Campground where we are staying is about six miles south of Joplin, and is home to not only tourists, but relief workers and tornado victims. Large tandem dump trucks are parked in the grassy areas of the campground, and there is an area below the main grounds designed for primitive camping and bikers known as “Area 51” where some victims have been staying. We were able to help some folks in both areas and we have made it known that our door is open for anyone who needs counseling and prayer. We will also try to work with one of the local churches for the remainder of our stay here.

By the way, a big *thank you* to whoever left the Wal-Mart gift card in my mailbox at work before the school year ended. It has gone to a woman who was working, ironically, at the Wal-Mart super center on Range Line Drive (yes, *that* one), who left for home *one hour* before the tornado erased the store from the face of the earth.

If anyone reading this still wishes to help the folks in Joplin, you have plenty of opportunity to do so. Though we will not be in town forever, you can send the help to us and we will see it gets to those actually helping people; gift cards for Wal-Mart and Lowe's are still good (clothing is not needed right now). If you wish to “cut out the

middle man,” as it were, you can send directly to those agencies on the ground in Joplin; there are a lot of refugees still living in shelters and tents, and this place gets *real* winters with serious snow and cold.

However, if you have the ability and the time to do so, don’t just send your money – *come* to Joplin. The late Christian songwriter Keith Green exhorted people at his concerts to *be* the hands and feet of Jesus, noting that in America, “it’s so easy for people to write a check, but God can’t cash out-of-state checks in Heaven; He needs you.”

I need to add a note of caution, though, especially for those who say they are coming in the Name of the Lord. Carolyn likes to say that people volunteer in situations like this for two reasons; to really help, or to feel self-important. If you are a believer, you have the knowledge that the God of the Universe, Creator of Heaven and Earth, made you for His purposes, loves you with a depth you cannot even begin to understand, and sent His Son to take the death penalty for your sins so that you could be restored to Him. If that doesn’t make you important, then I don’t know what will.

If you have even the tiniest of ulterior motives, then *do not come!* There have been enough hustlers coming in Jesus’ Name in the past to sour that Name with many people and turn them off to the Kingdom of God. And even believers who are not wholeheartedly sold out to the mission can wind up like the example Jesus gave in the passage from Matthew. But if you have a heart for hurting people, you don’t need a specific calling – Jesus already said, *go*. If you can come, God is giving you a great opportunity for service, taking care of His creation. These people are hurting; they need Christ, and we are His Body.

For the Glory of God and the Lord Jesus Christ
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