

June 9, 2013

Luke 7:7-17

Jesus Jazz

The Rev. Peter Cook

For about 4 years, I took a group of people from my church to New Orleans to fix up the homes of Katrina victims. During our work week, we would always take a few hours to visit the upper ninth ward, where you can find these lovely homes which are painted in very bright colors: Orange, and purple, green, Pink and yellow. The neighborhood is called Musicians Village.

Musicians Village was created after the great floods to offer a home for the many Jazz musicians. For many musicians in New Orleans they already lived in substandard housing prior to when Katrina slammed New Orleans in the summer of 2005. For others, they were homeowners who lost their very modest homes. Musicians village not only offered a place to live but became a cultural center which now features a small performance venue where musicians from the neighborhood and from around New Orleans can gather to hear artists share their music.

This neighborhood which is touching many lives and building community was made possible by Habitat Humanity. This work would resonate deeply with the compassion that Jesus taught us to have for one another. We might call that compassion Jesus Jazz.

In a short while I will go to Middle East and have the opportunity to visit the Village of Nain described in our Gospel lesson. Located a few miles south of the Sea of Galilee, Nain has a beautiful chapel which purportedly marks the spot where Jesus raised a young man from the dead. This resurrection story was born out of an intense crisis for a woman who had already lost her husband. She was a widow which meant that she did not experience much acceptance in some religious circles. And now to add to her pain, she lost her son.

For women at that time, their full acceptance into the community often came through their husbands or their oldest son if the husband was no longer alive. So losing one's husband and now son meant that this widow felt isolated. Jesus has compassion for her because he could see her pain that came first from her very personal loss and also from the fear of losing even more community support which was necessary for her survival and wholeness. For Jesus to raise her son from death restored not only her son but the widow also. Jesus bravely crossed social and political boundaries to do his work. Jesus Jazz.

If I may return to New Orleans for a few moments... I can remember taking a flight out of Chicago and striking up a conversation with my seat mate. Plane conversations are always a

potluck sort of experience. To quote Forest Gump conversations with plane seat mates is a little bit like a box of chocolates. You never know what you are going to get. I remember a few years earlier that I spoke with a gentleman who owned an ice making business who told me everything you wanted to know about making ice. I more recently sat next to a rock guitarist. I also met a man who headed up the department on international conflict resolution at the John's Hopkins School of international Relations.

The trip to New Orleans, however, turned out to taste more like a chocolate covered grasshopper. I asked the man about why he was headed to New Orleans. He explained he was going to a conference on energy plants which generate power from Switch Grass. I managed to stay interested for a little while. Sounded like an environmentally sound idea. But as we neared two hours of hearing the man go on and on about switch grass harvesting, burning, and power plants, I was seeing if I could signal the stewardess for a Bloody Mary. Finally, in desperation to see if I could break the switch grass monologue, I thought I would change the subject and just mention what I was doing. "I am going down to New Orleans with my church to help people rebuild their homes after Katrina," I proudly said, and then told the man a little bit about the Musicians Village and others things we are working on. The man sort of glared at me and asked why my church would bother with such a thing. He said quite incredulously that they should have just kept the water in New Orleans and not rebuild. "What a waste," he said. The flood, he seemed to imply, was not such a bad thing. It was just cleaning out a cesspool which should never be rebuilt. And then he went on to say some other disheartening things about the poor residents in these areas.

There was not a lot of Jesus Jazz going on here as we made our descent into New Orleans.

Before landing I did manage to offer a retort where I wonder aloud with him why it was when people construct their homes on top of earth quake faults in wealthy areas or construct their houses on posh shore lines frequently slammed by hurricanes, that no one gives a second thought about rebuilding or say it was not worth it because of the geography. I also pointed out that many of the workers at the convention center which were helping to make his switch grass convention possible needed a home to go to when they were done with work. I am sure he was not buying it.

Natural disasters when they affect the poor or people of color inevitable open up a conversation about a class divide and the limits of our compassion. In New Orleans in particular, many people who lost their loved ones in the flood along with their homes discovered it was very hard to prove ownership of their houses because they passed down through the generations without proper paperwork. There were not proper title transfers so it was hard to establish who actually owned the property when it was damaged. So for many, this was death on four fronts:

Losing loved ones.

Losing ones family home.

Losing one's community.
And being unable to get insurance money to rebuild.

The sense of isolation many felt was profound. Many felt like the widow in Nain. That woman not only mourned personal loss but who experienced economic and social isolation because of her loss. In these situations, it seems to me if Jesus was here, he would not have done a thorough class analysis and hand out a long form to be filled out in triplicate before acting. He just did something and offered his care to conquer the powers of death on so many levels. This is why so many volunteers and resources made a difference. A great prophet among us indeed. Jesus Jazz.

For our brothers and sisters in the areas affected by the recent tornados in Texas and Oklahoma, as a community and nation we are invited to offer our compassion money and care in much the same way that we offered our care to those affected by hurricane Irene or Sandy. Last Sunday, the Vermont Conference gave \$5,000 to the Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma to help with tornado relief which truly moved the pastor of Mayflower, who happened to be the guest speaker the weekend. The day before, Robin Meyers did pause for reflection when he observed that fewer lives would have been lost in the public schools had safe rooms been required especially in the schools, after the a very devastating tornado destroyed Moore a number of years ago. The story of course is cost.

Both democrats and republicans contend that there is not enough money. This moved Robin Meyers to ask the question why it was that there seemed to be plenty of money to build sky boxes in the new stadium, but no resources for schools to build much cheaper safe shelters to prevent harm especially when this area was knowingly so vulnerable to tornados.

A residential safe room can be installed for \$8,000.
A safe room in a public place like a school can be built for \$1.4 million.

It would, of course, be unfair to think that you can guard against all natural disasters. Nor does this become an occasion to say you can't build stadiums or sky boxes. But when disaster happens like it did in Oklahoma, we are invited to think more deeply about how we live a compassionate life and invest our resources as a community and nation. What are the priorities for our country? Sometimes what needs our money and compassion is often not very glamorous and does not bring immediate economic benefit. But as we defy the powers of death, it is well worth thinking about how we can reorder our hearts to invest in the common good and especially to empower the most vulnerable among us. All along the way, it is important that we lead with our hearts and not just our heads. Jesus Jazz.

If I may, some of the earlier signs of life and hope in New Orleans came from the jazz being played. The jazz offered a balm to the human pain and brought people into the presence of one

another when every thing was so tough and the powers of death were so strong. To follow the Jesus means to have compassion and an enlarged heart. As a compassionate people we yearn to see the human face of our neighbor. Music and other opportunities to celebrate are not frivolous. They stir the imagination, defy the power of death and embrace the overwhelming power of the resurrection which brings life. May we let the resurrected Christ pierce the darkness and help us embrace the light.

Jesus Jazz. Jesus Jazz.