

## **"A Love That is Greater"**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Romans 8: 18-27 and John 17: 20-26

It was the fall of 2004. I had given notice that I was leaving the church I was serving to venture off in an unpaid new church start. Cindy and I thought we could manage on her income for a while and I could focus on the dream I had at the time of founding a new church. Plus, I could stay home with the kids and save a lot of childcare money. Within a week of my resignation letter, Cindy found out she lost her job. Soon we would be living on only her unemployment with three young kids. We were completely unsure of what to do next.

This week I watched a young woman come into United Way here in Gaylord. They had four young children and had just found out that their home was destroyed by the tornado we had on May 20. She was completely unsure of what to do next, how to ask for help, or what she even needed. The tornado traumatized her.

People can compare our crises all day and try and decide which one is worse, but that's not what I'm about this morning. Instead, I want to conclude

our study of Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water* with the start of a conversation about human suffering. For Richard tells us that, "only those who have tried breathing under water know how important it is." Further, he tells us that "If God is somehow *in* the suffering, participating as a suffering object too, in full solidarity with the world that He or She created, then I can make some possible and initial sense of God and this creation. Then I stop complaining long enough to sit stunned and awakened by the very possibility. At least if *we are participating in something together*, and human suffering has some kind of direction or cosmic meaning, I can forgive such a God for leaving us in what seems like such desperate straits, and maybe I can even find love and trust for such a God."

We call tornadoes and other such events "acts of God". This couldn't be further from the truth. God is on our side of the tragedy, helping us to find hope and peace and the strength we need to move forward.

When Cindy and I experienced our crisis, I can remember that a couple of people wrote checks to us to help us get through. But the check I remember most was for \$100 and it came from a local church pastor and friend who told us not to use it for a bill, but do something special with the kids. I don't even remember

what we did, but there was a freedom there to do what we most needed, in the midst of our crisis, that made us feel cared for.

The woman and her family I think felt the same way. Volunteers who were sorting sat down with her and talked, while others were filling bags with needed items, but also toys and other “necessities” for young children. The food pantry worked together with the tornado relief folks and they loaded up the car with all kinds of things. And, the family was invited to come back in case there was something else they wanted or needed. Later that day they did return. It felt good to be able to offer them not only what they needed, but also some things that just might make them happier or more comfortable. The (hashtag)Gaylord Strong was in action that day. I was touched with emotion as I saw someone get what they needed, the same way I did in a different kind of crisis.

As tragic as crises are, they also bring out the best in people. It is especially true for those who have experienced crisis themselves. Richard Rohr tells us that “deep communion and dear compassion is formed much more by shared pain than by pleasure.” He goes on to say, “Only people who have suffered in some way can save one another.” This is not to glorify suffering, or tell you to go out and seek it, but it is so say, that suffering can often help build compassion for

others. Compassion is key to surviving crisis. It's a two-way street. One time we are the receiver, the next we are the giver. In both, we are community.

What I've experienced this past week in Gaylord is a far cry from what I experienced at a school board meeting a few months ago regarding masks in our public schools. I've been thinking about, what is the difference? Both masking and tornado relief are about caring for our community. Why was one such a fight and the other such a magnificent outpouring? At the United Way on Wednesday was one vehicle with all kinds of left-leaning stickers, and parked right next to it was a truck with right-leaning stickers on it. Surely those people were working together inside. How can we make that our reality instead of our constant bickering, name-calling, death threats, and outright hatred? Should it take a tragedy to bring our community together? And if so, how long does our compassion, trust, and working together last?

Richard Rohr tells us that we have a problem of pathological adolescence in our culture. Step 12 of the twelve steps has found a way to expose and transform that pathological adolescence by telling us early on that we must serve others. It's "not an option, not something we might eventually be 'called' to after thirty-five religious retreats and fifty years of church services; it is not something we do

when we get our act together. No, we do not truly comprehend any spiritual thing until we ourselves give it away.”

Richard starts chapter 12 with this paragraph, which I will use to end this musing about human love, compassion and service. “After trying to teach the Gospel for over forty years, trying to build communities, and attempting to raise up elders and leaders, I am convinced that one my major failures was that I did not ask more of people from the very beginning. If they did not turn outward early, they tended never to turn outward, and their dominant concern became personal self-development, spiritual consumerism, church as ‘more attendance’ at things, or to use the common phrase used by Christians ‘deepening my relationship with Jesus’ (most of which demands little accountability for what you say that relationship is). Bill W, [the founder of AA], seemed to recognize this danger early on. ***Until people’s basic egocentricity is radically exposed, revealed for what it is, and foundationally redirected, much religion becomes preoccupied with rearranging deck chairs on a titanic cruise ship, cruising with isolated passengers, each maintaining his or her personal program for happiness, while the whole ship is sinking (emphasis mine).***”

In the end, that's what I came to talk with you about this morning. We can't only care about each other when in the midst of terrible tragedy. We must find ways to be compassionate, caring, loving and empathetic. Not just now, but for the rest of our lives. The first law of thermodynamics says it best: *Energy cannot really be created or destroyed; it is merely converted to different uses.*

What are we using our energy for right now? It seems we are using it for good things. What will we use our energy for a month from now? A year from now?

For the only way to be delivered from our "body of death" is a love that is greater, a deeper connection that absorbs all the negativity and irritation with life and with ourselves. You learn how to 'fall in love' by falling many times, and you learn from many fallings how to recover from the falling. May we fall in love with one another again. Not just for a week or two after a tragedy, but for life.

Finally, I leave you with the wisdom of Aeschylus, the Greek dramatist who lived from 525 to 426 BCE, [who] presents the one eternal message in concise and poetic verse. It is wisdom available to all of us, at least by our later years – and if we are listening:

*He who learns must suffer.*

*And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget,*

*Falls drop by drop upon the heart,*

*And in our own despair, against our own will,*

*Comes wisdom to us, by the awful grace of God.*

Amen.

