

“KATRINA – WHAT ARE YOU TEACHING US?”

Like most of you, I have been watching the unfolding events initiated by Hurricane Katrina, as reported by the many television journalists. There are so many thoughts, feelings, perspectives, angles, and judgments sent our way from those who are there “up front and personal.”

These have been disturbing days for me, as I am sure, they have been for you. My desire in this “Pastor’s Column” is to share my thoughts, feelings, and impressions. I share them in a spirit of Christian honesty and dialogue that will, hopefully, help all of us to engage in conversation as we “take in” one of the greatest natural disasters our nation has ever experienced.

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. The face of poverty still has a color, and that color is black. A natural disaster of whatever kind, happening in any major city in our country today would affect most adversely the poor, and we must face the fact that the color of poor is still predominantly black.

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. The poor are growing in numbers, not decreasing. Yes, whether we like to admit it or not, the rich are getting richer; the poor are getting poorer. The divide is growing and the middle class is shrinking. We have given a blind eye to the poor in our midst. We have been and are ignoring “the elephant” in the living room.

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. To order a “mandatory evacuation” and to expect that everyone would have the means and ability to follow that order is naiveté. Did our various governmental agencies know that many people had no cars, no vehicles that would take them to safety; that they had no resources to pay people to somehow get them out? It is easy to order a mandatory evacuation and feel that our task has been accomplished. It is something totally other to order a mandatory evacuation, and then be aware of the needs of the people to whom the mandatory evacuation has been extended, and provide the necessary means to help them evacuate. There are tens of thousands of households in New Orleans without personal vehicles! How do they follow a mandatory evacuation order? Had anyone prepared an escape scenario?

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. Immediately many people, both conservative and liberal, both Democrat and Republican, are quick to point fingers and assess guilt for a slow response to the situation. Instead of focusing upon the needs of those who are stranded on rooftops, and in the Superdome and the Convention Center, we are accusing one another of fault. Are we all strong enough as a nation, to say that we were not prepared as we should have been, to discover what we could do better, how we can be more prepared for the future?

Are we all willing to be responsible for a slow response and are we willing to be ready for the future? Are we willing to accept the blame together as a nation, not point fingers at specific individuals, or government agencies, or political parties?

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. It is time to stop the name-calling. It is time to stop the accusations of racism. It is time to stop the placing of blame on a few of us. If we are to get out of this with new resolve and determination, we must, as a nation, accept the blame as one people. We were under-prepared. We didn’t heed the decades long warnings about what would happen to New Orleans if a strong hurricane hit head-on. We didn’t allocate the necessary money to be better prepared, despite all the studies that said otherwise. We decided to take a risk that this kind of scenario, though predicted to eventually happen, would never happen. This is the sign of American hubris that gets us into trouble over and over again.

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. We now focus on New Orleans and other Gulf Coast regions. When things settle down, and return to normalcy, will we be willing to look at the poor in our midst, wherever we find them, and be prepared to lessen the effects of whatever natural disasters may befall them and, yes, us?

Katrina has once again reminded the nation that we are out of touch with the poor in our society. Isn’t it time to reconnect?

F. Mike