

Disaster struck this week, and we saw her coming. We saw Sandy from space. We saw the characteristic cyclonic spin that defines a hurricane. And we saw her in color – shades of green, yellow, orange, and red described her intensity; and, God bless those folks in the Appalachians, Sandy even dressed up for Halloween in snow white.

Disaster struck this week, and we saw her coming. We were ready, and we are responding! The scene has shifted since Sandy came and thanks be to God went. We see images of destruction, and we see people rising to the challenge. Neighbors with chain saws just show up to clean up downed trees. We’re calling and checking in with each other, “Do you need anything? Are you OK?” Those of us with power offer a warm meal, a hot shower, and outlets with which to re-charge and re-connect.

Disaster struck. We were ready. And we are responding. Of course, we are, you might say. Of course, we love our neighbor this way. It’s what we do. We take for granted that we can rely on one another, but it wasn’t always so, and if we are not vigilant, it will not always be so.

Consider the book of Ruth. It’s defined by disaster. We begin in Bethlehem; the town’s name means “house of bread,” but before we hear the praises of King David that are two generations away, and good tidings of great joy that angels will sing to greet Jesus’ birth in the time to come, we hear desperate conversations around dinner tables; destruction is coming. The rains haven’t fallen. The crops are failing. There will be famine in the land; there’s no bread for the house of bread, so Elimelech and Naomi become refugees who settle in Moab. They prosper there. Sons are born; they marry. But disaster strikes again; Elimelech dies; Mahlon and Chilion die; and three widows face a desperate and uncertain future.

The ancient world did not provide a safety net for people in need. People took care of their own, but family ties only went so far when there were more mouths to feed than food to go around. Naomi’s only option was to return to Bethlehem and hope that her family would take her in; they would overlook the fact that when hard times came, she didn’t stick it out. She cut and ran, and now, she’s back in town, a widow beyond child-bearing age in a society where a woman’s worth was defined by having children and being married. She was a nobody who could only take, because she had nothing to give.

Disaster had struck, and Naomi prepares herself to spend the rest of her life enduring the devastation. She’s bitter and decides to go it alone; but, she’s in for a surprise. Ruth won’t leave her alone. Ruth refuses to live by the values of a society that said, “You’re on your own. You made your bed. Now lie in it.” Instead, Ruth says, *Ruth 1:16–17 (NRSV)* “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

Ruth models the great virtue of the Old Testament – *hesed*. The English language cannot rise to the spiritual heights of *hesed*. Sometimes a translation may call it “kindness,” or “loving kindness,” or “steadfast love.” One writer calls it, “the discipline of generosity that binds Israelites to one another and to God.”

Hesed shapes our lives and transforms a society. *Hesed* loves our neighbor as ourselves. If we want to know God, practice *hesed*, because that is what God is like. To love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, is to be a community defined by *hesed*.

Hesed gives us the keys to the kingdom of God. It is a commitment; a “discipline of generosity” that we practice in good times and in bad times, when disaster strikes and when the harvest is plentiful. Come what may, where you go, I go.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor, has seen what a society looks like when it rejects *hesed*. He knows firsthand what people will do when we refuse to commit to generosity. “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.”¹

Disaster struck this week, and Pennside demonstrated *hesed*. Tuesday night, the night after Sandy did her damage, we donated food. We prepared and served a meal for 65 homeless men, women, and children at Opportunity House. We gave to people that it is all too easy to view with the same kind of disdain that Naomi faced when she returned to Bethlehem. All they do is take; why should we give?

We should give because we need to give; giving gives us the opportunity to be a community defined by *hesed*; giving gives us the chance to grow in our discipline of generosity that binds us to one another and to God; giving transforms us from and make us agents of transformation in a culture that responds to ordinary needs, the chronic societal problems that resist a quick fix, with indifference and an inclination to blame and shame; giving allows us to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom of God.

Pennside's mission is clear: We are sent to serve, and we served more than meatballs Tuesday night; we were a taste of heaven here on earth. We were a community defined by *hesed*.

This week and next, we have the opportunity to grow in our discipline of generosity; we can make a commitment to God and to one another; we can pledge.

God has been good to us during this “great recession.” And God will be good to us in the coming year. Our finances aren't the question; our faith is the question; do we trust God enough to commit, or will we backslide into the easy indifference our culture craves? Will we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and might; will we love our neighbor as ourselves? Or will we simply take care of our own and look out for #1?

Disaster struck this week, and we were ready. 2013 will have its challenges. Get ready. Grow in the discipline of generosity. Commit, and make a pledge. Say to God and to one another, “Come what may, where you go, I go.” Amen.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Verse and Voice*, 10/16/12, Sejourners.com