

Ordinary 28
10.13.24

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, one of the only ways the people in storm-damaged western North Carolina were able to connect with others was by listening to AM radio – particularly 570 WWNC. Because cell service was spotty, the residents of that part of North Carolina found that WWNC was the only way to get updates from and information out to loved ones.

After Helene passed, thousands there were prevented from leaving their homes or places of refuge where they stayed during the storm. Trees had fallen on their houses, their cars, and driveways and blocked them in. In response to that difficulty, a group of folks banded together taking their chainsaws out into the community to help free neighbor after neighbor.

One of these volunteers remarked with a chuckle that this was the only time in his adult life where he reached out to neighbors without first asking who they voted for. Responding to the needs that were out there went beyond political party or affiliation for this dedicated volunteer and hero.

Maybe without his knowing it, that young man embodies what today's readings challenge us to do. Both the first reading from the Book of Wisdom and the gospel reading taken from St. Mark talk about what is most important. Both acknowledge the sway that earthly goods and riches can have over us. In today's world, they also point out the hold that political parties and platforms can have on us as well. Consequently, God is challenging us to look at what is most important – possessions, political affiliation? Or our God and the presence of God in other people.

On Wednesday morning, I left the rectory for shelter on higher ground in the middle of Pinellas county. Many of my possessions are here at the parish. I ended up taking a few clothes, some documents, the Eucharist from the tabernacle here in church, and items I could use to say Mass each day. That's it. That's what was most important for me. I left everything else behind.

We hear Jesus in today's gospel preaching that it is tough for rich people to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Being rich isn't bad or sinful. But sometimes our possessions can get in the way or blind us from seeing what is most important. For me, this hurricane once again reminded me of the few important things I have. And it helped me to once again affirm what is most important – my faith, my family, and my friends.

In my Pastor's Column found in today's bulletin, I pointed to the story in the First Book of Kings about the great Old Testament figure of Solomon. God told Solomon he could ask for anything in the world. Who of us hasn't wondered what things we would ask for if given the chance? Rather than seek fortune or fame, Solomon asks for an understanding heart. He seeks wisdom which will help him to make right decisions and judgements. Because of that humble request, God said he would grant Solomon's request and make Solomon among the wisest of all human beings. And, as the scriptures point out, that is exactly what happened. Even today we refer to some people as having the "wisdom of Solomon."

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Helene and now Milton, you might be dreaming about things you'd like to have or are wishing and asking for – AC because your power is still out, a new truck because your old one was swallowed by salt water, a home to go back to since your manufactured home at Crystal Bay or your home in Baywood seems beyond repair. Certainly those things are good and even necessary. But they are not the only thing.

Today we reflect on what IS most important and now attempt to pursue those most important things as best we can.

In 1988, I was assigned to Incarnation Parish in the Town and Country area of Tampa. That area floods on a good day. When Hurricane Elena was approaching our area that year, I evacuated to a neighboring parish on Florida Avenue. When I left the rectory, the waters were already up to the bottom of our front door. The rectory of the parish I evacuated to was on higher ground and built like a bunker.

The weekend the hurricane hit, I was supposed to do a wedding for a lovely couple. The groom was a pilot with the Air Force at MacDill. Since he was shipping out to California on Sunday, he asked if we could still do the wedding. I married that couple in a makeshift chapel, dressed in running shoes, jeans, and a t-shirt. And the couple gathered without family and friends. They didn't have the church wedding which they hoped for. The bride didn't get to wear her wedding gown. They didn't have a reception like they planned and paid for. They didn't even have their family and friends to support them and surround them as they celebrated the biggest event of their life. But they still had their love and their desire to build a life together despite a hurricane which swirled all around them. This couple focused on and held to what was most important. When I think about them, they remind me of what is most important. The experience of these two hurricanes which hit our area these last two weeks did the same.

While we mourn our losses from these storms, as we should, we also seek God's grace to focus on what is most important – God's love for us, our faith in him, the blessing of family and friends, and so many other things which we take for granted. Having that awareness is truly wise, the greatest of blessings, and a reminder that our true home is with God in his Kingdom.