

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Last Sunday after Epiphany

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Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

Picture if you can a house that has been sitting wet for 18 months. Sheetrock, carpet, clothes, cabinets wet. One house whose second floor carpet was squishy, though that was at least in part from the hole in the roof that let in some of Tuesday morning's thunder storms and rainwater (that section of town was mercifully spared the tornadoes). I'm not sure if the hole in the roof was ripped there by Katrina or slowly created by the rotting away of wood. Whatever the reason, something tells me that carpet hasn't been dry for 18 months. A second floor with vaulted ceilings, mold discoloring the sheetrock up to the very top, beams on the second floor at least 8 feet off the floor totally eaten away by mold. And that was in a middle class neighborhood of New Orleans East, not the lower income, decimated area of the lower ninth ward. Not the lower income, sketchy neighborhood where we spent the first 4 ½ days. There we found mold in the rafters. What we suspect was probably mildew covered up in the bathroom years ago by adding a second layer of sheetrock over the first; now soaked and saturated by the more recent onslaught and infestation of disgusting black and green mold. Leaving an entire corner of a room, crawling through a closet and into the next room, with studs that are soft and squishy with rot and more mold.

And the story of that house only makes the tragedy deeper. This is the first home ever purchased by an older couple, currently living in exile in Texas. They managed to scrape together the money to buy the house 5 years ago, and now they sit. They were lucky enough to have insurance, but when the city of New Orleans applied pressure and said everyone had to show signs by the first anniversary of Katrina that they were planning to come back – get to work on the house, get it cleaned out and start to work on it, or else – the only way they knew to protect their property was to use the insurance money and pay off the mortgage. So it's all theirs now, but they don't have anything left to put into repairing it. He's recently retired and having trouble adjusting to that new reality. They want to come back. They intend to come back, but still don't have a plan. We walked around the house for 4 ½ days saying, there's no way this house can ever be safe to live in, can ever be salvaged, can ever be a home again. But how do we know that? Now that we've cleaned it out, an inspector will come in and give them either a thumbs up or a thumbs down. And it's easy for us to say, don't even think about it; but it's all they have. It represents what they've spent their lives working toward. How do they walk away now? And if they walk away, what will they have left? Do they even have enough to pay to tear it down? Would someone buy the vacant lot? The rotted remains? Multiply that times 4,000, 5,000 or more houses that still need to be gutted and cleaned, that still remain mold factories. Add to that the countless thousands of other houses that stand in some form of empty, gutted and waiting, partially repaired but stalled, streets emptied of life, FEMA trailers scattered about, more on

some blocks than others, but all too often not many signs of life. This may be a detail you don't want to hear and I'm not sure even my co-workers experienced, but imagine being in the midst of a city neighborhood with houses all around and being able to find a corner out in back of the house where you can pee in privacy – because there's no one else in sight. And trust me, there's no other place to pee unless you get in your car and go in search of a McDonald's or Lowe's.

We went back to the house we spent four days emptying last year, and were thrilled to see sheetrock up and painted, hard wood floors down, holes patched, life being restored. They're not in it yet, but it won't be long. We talked with the husband and son of the family, I had a chance to step inside, and it was really wonderful to see what progress they've made. And yet, we also couldn't help but notice the signs of mildew discoloring the siding on the outside of the house, what we had to assume were the stubborn remnants of mold what they've worked so hard to erase. Their house sits next to one that has been gutted but stands empty; and that house stands next to one that is boarded up and my hunch is has had nothing done to it. I would say that on that block there were maybe 4 or 5 FEMA trailers, but we saw few other signs of life. I'm not sure there are other houses being lived in yet. What will it be like for that family when they have actually done enough work that the house is ready to reoccupy? Can they move in and live on that street, in the midst of that ghost town?

And yet, I have to tell you, in the midst of all of that, destruction and decay and despair are not all that are there. I can't even begin to describe for you the glimpses of grace and glory that we experienced everywhere we went. As we carried insulation or pushed a wheelbarrow of sheetrock and sludge out to the pile in front of the house, people driving by on the street would stop and say, thank you for coming. We met volunteers from Washington State, Massachusetts, and Ohio who were also there to do what they could. Four members of our team spent the bulk of their week in a UCC church with a tiny, struggling congregation and a large building who have decided to make a large part of it available to house even more volunteers, so our guys were there helping get it ready, working on new sheetrock, putting in ceiling tiles, adjusting electricity, hanging doors.

And then there's Little Farms UCC, the relatively small church where we have stayed for the past two years. Imagine if you can a congregation that has opened their building to house the office of the UCC Disaster Recovery ministry. And they've offered their building to up to 20 volunteers each week to come and sleep and shower and fix meals and be as much at home as is possible while there. Last year we slept on air mattresses on folding cots or the floor; this year, they've added bunk beds to hold those mattresses. And this year something even more special has been added – that's the gift of themselves. Last year, we were met by one woman when we arrived Sunday afternoon. This year, they brought us dinner on Monday night – and they do that every Monday night to thank the volunteers who have come to work in their midst. I would guess 20 or more of them came, bringing beef brisket and red beans and rice and all kinds of delicious food. And every time any one of them looked at us they said thank you; thank you for coming, thank you for being here, thank you for caring. At the heart of all of that was Miss Eleanor who brought two cakes for our dinner Monday night, who brings cake to every dinner every Monday night. Who took home leftover bread from that dinner, and the next night returned with a large pan of bread pudding with some very special whiskey sauce. And when she came back on Thursday for choir, she stopped in and visited and laughed and told stories and said thank you

yet again. Miss Eleanor is in her 80's, and just can't do enough to express her appreciation and gratitude. She had damage to her home, and every time volunteers went over to work on it, she sat them down and plied them with food. Everything about her says grace and glory and thanks and praise.

And there was Marcy, a woman that 5 of us worked closely with all week. She carried tools to and from our worksite every day, and was generally the overseer of our work. Marcy is a woman in her late 40's who has been volunteering for the past 2 ½ years – with Heifer International, with Habitat for Humanity in Zambia. She was in New Orleans earlier, and when they called her early in the fall and asked if she'd come back for another 6 months, she said yes. When I asked her what she did before she started volunteering, she said she worked for the electric company – and she could have stayed there and been miserable for the rest of her life, but instead she decided to get out and give back to humanity. I asked her how long she was going to do this, and she said, until my money runs out and I have to go back to work. She is an amazing woman of joy and spark, of prayer and faithfulness. She talks readily about the ways God is leading and directing her. She told us one day of having stopped on the highway because there had been an accident and she wanted to see if she could help. She was telling us what had happened, how angry and irrational one woman had been, and then sort of stopped herself mid-story and said, I should have prayed for that woman – and told us later than she had.

Glimpses of glory scattered throughout a city of death and devastation. Not exactly a transfiguration on top of a mountain, but strong and powerful reminders of the presence of God, the promise of life and the gift of grace. For Peter and James and John, Jesus' transfiguration was sandwiched between weeks of exhausting work and frustration – and Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem and rejection, betrayal and death. In the middle of that, they were overwhelmed with glory and light and grace and majesty. And they carried the light and warmth and reassurance of that experience with them through all that was yet to come.

I doubt that any of us will ever experience the same sort of transfiguration that they did on that mountain with Jesus, but we are given glimpses of glory to carry us through. Even standing smack dab in the middle of brokenness, in the middle of a world threatened by war, in the middle of budget cuts, in the middle of hurricanes and tornadoes and nor'easters, we hold on to God, we call upon God, we are sustained by the glimpses we have already seen. Those moments when people are healed and comforted, those times when violence gives way to reconciliation and selfishness gives way to love, those moments when whole communities reach out and care for one another. We are sustained by those moments and strengthened to go back out, to continue to reflect God's light in all of those places of brokenness and need. Or as one commentator has written,

When cures and healing are beyond our powers, when the shine on a loved one's face comes from tears in the fluorescent lights of intensive care, when the third day (of resurrection) seems far off – on such days it is good to be in this story, listening to the voice that urges us to follow on, for the Word shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (Heidi Neumark, *The Christian Century*, February 6, 2007)