

Lord, how might we help?

Mark 9:30–37

First, I wish to acknowledge publicly what some of you already know: I am wearing a new pair of glasses!

In addition, I was hospitalized last week out of concern for my cardiac health. Thankfully, the hospital tests were very reassuring. While I will have follow-up outpatient appointments, I have excellent doctors who assure me that I have a "structurally and functionally normal heart." Amen. I'm grateful for your continued prayers.

Meanwhile, my spirit is heavy due to Hurricane Helene's destruction. This is the heart of what I wish to preach this morning. Let us pray: *May the words from my heart and the meditation of all our hearts bring us comfort and challenge in your name, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.*

From Florida to Tennessee, the wind and water damage is horrific. I understand that our congregation has many connections to churches, homes, communities, and families in the mountains of western North Carolina. The Presbyterian camp and conference center in Montreat has suffered devastation. This is a place close to many hearts. Indeed, many places, such as Montreat, remind me of a concept from Celtic Christianity called a thin place—a location where the boundary between this world and the next is almost permeable. A thin place is a glimpse of heaven on earth.

Hurricanes remind us that for all the thin places, this is not paradise. We live in a world of both natural disaster and beauty.

This most recent natural disaster has caused me to interpret this morning's gospel from a new perspective. Jesus tells the disciples about his impending crucifixion—his own disaster—and they fall silent. This was not an experience of a thin place. There was no sacred stillness or awe. They were afraid to speak.

Like the disciples, I don't understand the violence of the world. I think that people, whether preachers or pundits, make a cruel mistake by attempting to "explain" such a tragedy as an act of God or evidence of divine wrath.

But while we should not attempt to explain, I don't believe that, like the disciples, we should be afraid to speak at all. We have questions, not answers, which Jesus voiced from the cross: Why, O God, have you forsaken us? Life can feel like that.

Wendell Berry puts it like this in his poem, "The Way of Pain."

I read of Christ crucified,
the only begotten Son
sacrificed to flesh and time

and all our woe. He died
and rose, but who does not tremble
for his pain, his loneliness,
and the darkness of that hour?

Berry echoes the old spiritual, "Sometimes it causes me to tremble," which is an allusion to the Apostle Paul's line that we are working out our faith with trembling. Through faith, we believe God was with Jesus in that disaster and is with the suffering, lonely, and grieving. For God so loves the world. When our hearts are broken, God's heart breaks.

And perhaps questions in response to tragedy can also motivate us. Imagine if, upon hearing Jesus predict his death, the disciples had the courage to ask, "Lord, how might we help?" This question, while not an explanation, can answer someone else's prayer.

We are called in different ways. Our friends at Black Mountain Presbyterian happened to have freezers full of food for a church retreat this weekend. For the larger community, they cooked everything on gas grills and fed hundreds of people.

How might we help here in Chapel Hill? Mary Donna's daughter, Shelley, evacuated her home in Asheville and has volunteered to take a U-Haul full of supplies as soon as the roads are clear. We can help collect donations.

We can help with financial donations to the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and other organizations already mobilizing relief efforts. Our youth group is interested in leading these efforts with a fundraiser.

Once workers clear the roads and restore the power, we will have more opportunities to volunteer. We must continue to pray, "Lord, how can we help?"

Yes, the destruction is overwhelming. It's challenging to imagine what one person or one church can do.

But return to the gospel: after telling the disciples about his impending death, Jesus holds a little child in his arms. "Whoever welcomes one such little child," he declares, "welcomes me." Jesus made it clear that little people are sacred, just as well as little acts. Little acts that can add up.

If a thin place is a momentary glimpse of heaven on earth, the communion of saints is the belief that we are not alone. Our actions swell with the chorus of works by saints across time and space, furthering the coming fulfillment of the kingdom of God. We are a part of it, even if we don't get to see it.

Yesterday, at Georgana Bond's funeral, her son Garth told a story. Georgana had a career in education, including as a reading specialist for children with dyslexia. She then joined Mt. Zion in our after-school tutoring, welcoming the little children. Almost a decade after Georgana

helped to start this program, the first child that she had tutored graduated from high school. Georgana's works continue to impact the world after her death.

Little people are sacred; little acts are sacred; indeed, there is no small act of love. Perhaps we will not see the full result, yet we can trust that we are part of the labor of love that, by grace, ceaselessly works for good—good that is not ours alone but for the future, for the children and children's children, which is ultimately for us all.

God is faithful still. Let us pray: God, our refuge and strength, in times of peace and through the storms, strengthen us all the day long until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes. Then grant us a holy rest and peace at the last—peace that comes to our hearts like balm.

Andrew Taylor-Troutman

September 28, 2024