

Sunday, July 1, 2012

by: Roy G. Pollina

“Genuine Love”

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Well let me begin by thanking all of you who did NOT ask me how my vacation was last week. I was gone for two Sundays in a row, but my travel was not for vacation. In fact, last Sunday I and nine companions, seven youth: Lee & Mitchell Hamlet, Drewry Hall, McKay & Scott Ullstein, J’Vontea Perminter and Emily Thomas. Along with two adults, Alison Calfee and Naomi Hodge- Muse went to New Orleans for a Mission Trip. Our goal was to repair homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Why, almost seven years after the storm, houses are still in need of repair and I will talk about in a minute.

For now, let me say, that the ten of us lent ourselves to the Episcopal Community Services of the Diocese of Louisiana, who set us up with a United Way Organization called Phoenix of New Orleans, Louisiana (PNOLA) to work on homes. The cost of the trip was about \$700 per person. Over half of that was for the airplane ticket. Christ Episcopal Church’s Mission Committee put up 1/3 of the money and the individuals put up 2/3. The Rector’s Discretionary Fund assisted with the cost for the adult chaperones. So, for their \$466, seven youth ages 15-17 got to work in un-air conditioned houses in 90 degree heat, 90% humidity, shower at the Tulane University Student Rec Center and sleep in sleeping bags on the floor of the Sunday School Classrooms in the undercroft of St. George’s Episcopal Church. Breakfast was cereal and fruit in the morning; the afternoon meal was a sack lunch made the night before and kept in a cooler. Our dinner was prepared by Alison and Naomi or we were treated twice by members of St. George’s Church.

Before I tell you about the houses and our repairs, let me remind you of what happen in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Katrina was a massive category five hurricane, it diminished to category three by the time it entered and hit land in along the Gulf Coast. The eye of Katrina hit Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, but Katrina was so large

and powerful it could still blow the roof off of the Superdome in New Orleans. The real damage done to New Orleans was not the storm, but the failure of the levy systems and the canal system that brought tidal surge into neighborhoods.

PNOLA divided our Mission Group into two groups, one group of four and the other a group of six. The house that I worked on with Lee, Mitchell, Drewry, Scott, and Emily had water to the ceiling over several days after Katrina. All of the sheet rock, cabinets, and fixtures were removed; the house was gutted to the studs and new sheet rock and fixtures were re-installed. All of these repairs were done with insurance money, state and federal assistance. Then, the wiring in the house started to fail and the smell of mold and chemicals permeated the house. The repairs to the house had been done with tainted Chinese dry wall. Again, the family was evacuated. All of the walls, fixtures, cabinets, and wiring were removed. This house was gutted for a second time. Only this time, there was no money for the repairs, which is why a group of teenagers from Martinsville worked on the house in the heat of June 7 years after the hurricane.

In the other house, the one worked on by McKay, Alison, Naomi and J’Vontea, the problem was not Chinese dry wall, but incompetent contractors. Doors would not close, windows would not shut and there were all sorts of problems with poorly done repairs. Unless you think that the owners should have taken more care about who they hired, I ask that you consider the situation after Hurricane Katrina, when house after house block after block, neighborhood after neighborhood were crying for repair. Consider what you would do with your family sleeping on the floor of a friend’s or of relative’s home with school about to start for your children but you are dozens of miles away. You want desperately to fix your house but the contractor wants all of the money up front. You know paying that way is terribly unwise, but it has taken you months to get anybody to talk to you about repairs. The guy tells you, either pay or he will go down the block and find more work. So, against better judgment many of the people in New Orleans hired fly by night, unbonded, uncertified contractors, in an attempt to get back to some sort of normal life.

The house I helped repair had no electricity or running water. There was a portalet out in the front yard and a contractor's pole with an outlet for two electrical lines. One line ran the compressor for the nail gun and the other was shared by the table saw and miter saw. There was no air conditioning or no fans. Yes, the youth age 15 to 17 measured the windows, cut the 1x6 boards to make the window boxes, and they measured and mitered the trim and nailed it together with the nail gun. They hung doors, installed floor trim and sealed it all with caulk.

In the other house, it was much the same with the added attraction of knocking out sheet rock with heavy hammers, a particularly dirty, dusty job. When the work was done at the houses, we traveled to the Tulane University Student Rec Center for our showers. On the weekend, we worked some more at St. George's Episcopal Church. St. George's has a feeding program called Dragon Café; it is very similar to what we do here with Loaves & Fishes. Dragon Cafe started right after Hurricane Katrina when the church opened its kitchen to church members whose homes did not have gas, electricity, or water to prepare meals. Later, once the members got settled, they continued the program, only this time they fed FEMA workers and volunteers who were in town to help with the repairs. For the last few years, every Sunday, the Dragon Café feeds 80 to 100 breakfasts of coffee, juice, eggs, biscuits, sausage, and grits to anyone who shows up. This can be homeless people or people who are just crashing around the neighborhood. After breakfast everyone receives a bag lunch. On Friday, Christ Church's Mission Group bagged 300 lunches for the Dragon Café. On Sunday morning, we woke up at 6 a.m. so that we could begin cooking at 7 a.m. The Dragon Café director gave the St. George's members the day off so we could do the cooking. We served about 85 people that Sunday. We stacked our sleeping bags and pillows, the ones that we used all week, by the front door and gave them to anyone who needed them. All of this was photographed and the pictures are on display in the digital frame in the Narthex.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes about "testing the genuineness of your love against the

earnestness of others." He writes about "a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need." Before leaving for New Orleans, I was asked many times why I was taking our youth to repair homes in New Orleans when there is a great need for the same type of work in Martinsville and Henry County. My response was based on impressions I received on three other youth mission trips and goes to the heart of Paul's desire to test the genuineness of love. Sure, we could have done the work here in Martinsville, but we would not have left our comfort zone. In Martinsville, we would have awoke each morning in our own beds, showered in our own bathrooms, eaten breakfast and dinner from our own kitchens, and after work we could have watched TV, played video games and never left our comfort zone.

On our last evening in New Orleans, as we always did, we gathered as a group to discuss the day and since it was our last evening we discussed the week. We talked about whether we could have had the same experience if we stayed at home. To a person, everyone, youth and adult agreed that it was difference in New Orleans. I think Naomi Hodge-Muse said it best. She said that somehow by eating sack lunches, and sleeping on the floor, that in some mystical way, we had a share in the suffering of the people that we tried to help. I reflected on what Naomi said and it occurred to me that the last time I had slept on a floor was the three weeks in 2005, in my own home in Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina.

Well, sometime in the fall, in a couple of months, Christ Episcopal Church will be looking for people, youth, and adults to make the 2013 Mission Trip. Perhaps, you will receive the grace to sign up and test to see if your love is genuine. AMEN.