

Anthropomorphism

Isaiah 49:8-16

November 19, 2006

What is your deepest human need? What is it that more than anything else, you cannot live without?

Is it food or water or shelter? Food and water and shelter are basic biological needs, essential to survival. You cannot live long without them. And yet, while you live, you can live without them, for a time. And you are about more than your biology. Life is about more than mere survival. You are spirit as well as body.

What is your deepest human need? Is it usefulness? Is it the need to feel useful, that the time and effort you expend matters, makes a difference, that your life serves some higher purpose than just taking up space, using up oxygen?

Is it dignity? Is it the need to feel respected, acknowledged, that your life is recognized as having value, that you matter, that you are not trivial, base, expendable?

Or is it love? Is the need for love -- the need to matter to somebody, to be cared about, to be cared for, to be remembered -- is love your deepest human need?

I believe that love is our deepest human need. When we are loved, we come alive. Body and spirit alike are animated and energized. And love can mitigate the effects of the worst of circumstances. Love drives out fear. Love covers over a multitude of sins. Love makes the deepest pain bearable. Love makes a poor man rich and a weak man strong, a timid woman brave and a humble woman proud. Love transcends even death: love's memory keeps the one who is loved alive in heart and mind.

Love is our deepest human need. To be remembered and loved is life. To be forgotten and ignored is death. Does anyone remember me? Does anyone know my name? Does anyone even care that I exist?

I remember, many years ago, a Thanksgiving I spent alone: no family with whom to share the holiday, no Thanksgiving table, just me sitting alone at a table in a restaurant, eating turkey and gravy. I didn't feel sad or sorry for myself. I just felt empty, just empty ... empty and forgotten.

Forgotten ... like the people of Pearlinton, Mississippi. A month after Katrina overwhelmed Pearlinton, a young photojournalist wrote in his blog about his mother and her neighbors:

I know what it looks like now to watch people fight for their lives, sinking in quicksand. And I'm shouting, help, look, and yet there's no cavalry to save the day, and the sheriff's fat and content and sleeping off his binge while people sink and die.

This disaster is huge, and getting bigger by the day. Like the mold that's slowly eating all their lowly possessions, neglect and incompetence and cronyism are slowly eating these poor people alive.

My mom's little trailer was in Pearlington. After the storm, Pearlington started off ignored and has slowly devolved into forgotten. When I talked to the one FEMA inspector handling the whole town, he could barely look me in the eye. Not because he was a shady man, but I sensed, because he had been abandoned, too, and he knew the futility and impotence of his mission. Polishing brass on the Titanic would be too charitable a way to describe his task. More like, standing next to the brass, telling you he's going to be polishing it very soon, as soon as some cloth arrives.

Between you and me, the only help is going to come from you and me. Forget about FEMA. Forget about the Red Cross. We were hopeful when, after three weeks, a Red Cross truck showed up and started serving hot lunches. About the same time they began prepping the local school ... as a shelter for the people who were living in tents in their front yards next to the rubble of their homes.

The locals were shocked and frustrated with all the demands Red Cross had for the space before they'd use it.

"We need dehumidifiers." Says Red Cross.

We need air conditioning." Says Red Cross.

"We need a 100k generator." Says Red Cross.

"We need to power wash the walls, maybe even repaint." Says Red Cross.

"We're afraid of being sued." Says Red Cross.

After waiting eight days (three weeks after the disaster) Red Cross left, and even took their hot lunch van with them.

The people of Pearlington, Mississippi needed socks and underwear and coffee and sugar and towels and ice chests and boots, but, most of all, they needed to be remembered.

Forgotten ... like the people of Qaim, a city in Iraq's Al Anbar province, targeted for military action by the occupying forces as a breeding ground for the insurgency.

Qaim was a thriving town of 150,000 before the recent American operations there. Now these thousands of people are refugees, surviving wherever they can. Many Qaim residents have found shelter in an abandoned phosphate factory about one hour east of Qaim, in a place known as Akashaat. Under the previous regime Akashaat was a small community constructed around the phosphate factory, with houses and a small market built specifically for the workers. Until recently the factory and houses were completely abandoned, after the factory was shutdown.

When International Peace Angels, a humanitarian aid agency, traveled to Akashaat three weeks ago, they found between three hundred fifty and five hundred families living in the abandoned buildings. These buildings have no doors, and the glass in the windows was long since removed, either by the previous owners or Bedouin scavengers. There is no running water and no electricity. Rana Alaiouby, the director of International Peace Angels explains, "They have to travel to Rutbah to bring water back in tankers." Rutbah is close to seventy-five kilometers from Akashaat ...

The refugees in Akashaat needed medicine and food and blankets, water and electricity, but, most of all, they needed to be remembered.

Forgotten ... like the people of Jerusalem, those few Jews who remained in Jerusalem after the city had been ravaged, after most of its population had been deported. They felt forgotten and abandoned -- abandoned by God -- with good reason. They had no life, nothing that would resemble a life: no culture, no economy, no government, no Temple, no hope, no future, just day-to-day doing their best to survive, refugees in their own hometown. They felt forgotten by God, just as many in our day may feel forgotten by God, with good reason: Katrina survivors and Iraqi civilians, Palestinians and Darfuris caught in the crossfire of endless conflict, poor people, sick people, bereaved people. *He has forgotten us!*

*Can a woman forget her own baby
and not love the child she bore?
Even if a mother should forget her child,
I will never forget you.
Jerusalem, I can never forget you!
I have written your name
on the palms of my hands ...*

Their names are written on the palms of his hands? But God doesn't have hands. It's just a figure of speech, an anthropomorphism, attributing human qualities to something that is not human. God doesn't have hands, so why should we suppose God to have a heart? When we say God feels pity or God feels love, isn't that an anthropomorphism, too?

Isn't the whole idea of a God who feels anything an anthropomorphism, a self-indulgent fantasy, a wishful supposition, in the face an indifferent and merciless universe? Isn't it true that we make up gods that look and act very much like us, to make us feel important, to make us feel at home, to make us feel that Someone is on our side, looking out for us?

Yes, it is true. We do often make up gods that think and act and feel an awful lot like we do, gods that endorse our plans and bless our prejudices. That's called anthropomorphism. That's called idolatry.

But the living God resists anthropomorphism. The living God forbids idolatry. The living God is not a God we could have imagined. God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God's justice is deeper and fairer and truer than the justice of any person or nation, and God's love is higher and stronger and broader and more enduring than any love we could have ever imagined.

The living God is not something we have made up, but Someone who has made us up! It is not that we have attributed our nature to an inhuman God, but that God has endowed us humans with a measure of his nature! We love, we can love at all, because God first loved us. This is the startling and unexpected reality: that at the center of the universe, from the being of time until the end of time, is a God who pities, a God who comforts, a God who loves, a God who declares, *I will never forget you!*

I will never forget ... you.

I believe that the need to be loved is our deepest human need, and I hope and pray that you will be loved, that you are loved and are remembered by people who care about you. But whether or not any person ever loves you, this is true, today and forever: God will never forget you!

On August 29, 2006, the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the young photojournalist wrote this in his blog:

Today is silence for me. Breathe in, breathe out. Respect for all that we've endured, thankfulness for all the help we received. Jaw set tight. It's still too enormous for me to get my head around, so I won't try. Words are often useless for me, and today, more so.

So instead, a simple photograph of my mom's Eden, one year on. She's sitting on the front porch of what will be her new home soon. It's risen on the foundation of the home Katrina destroyed, only steps away from her FEMA trailer, and every day she looks out the trailer window a thousand times at it, and her gold smile lights up, and she whispers "Thank you, Jesus."

It's been built by the sweat and love of volunteers from all over the country. From all walks of life they've come into the Gulf to help their brothers and sisters. Normal, average Americans, disgusted by their government's inaction, they've picked up hammers and done it themselves.

One day there's a moldering heap of rubble, the next day hippie volunteers from Burning Man bulldoze it and take it away. One day it's a flat slab of concrete, the next day a pre-fab home kit is delivered by One House At A Time and New Hope Construction. One day there's a jumble of materials, the next day a church group from Oregon shows up and builds the frame and shell. A little later a group from Pennsylvania shows up and paints it my mom's favorite shade of green, and puts a tin roof on so she can hear the rain fall at night. And not to be outdone, a group from Alabama comes over and sheet rocks the interior, then comes back and builds her a deck for good measure.

Like I said, too enormous for me to get my head around. So today I want to just sit and rest, and enjoy the look of pride and place in my mom's eyes.

We may have far to go, but we've come a long way.

We do have far to go, but we will get there, because God will not forget us, and because God will not let us forget each other, because God's love endures forever, the love that comes alive through our hearts and our words and our hands.

Thank you, Jesus! Thanks be to God!