

A week ago St. Matthew's went on mission to NE Iowa. 17 of our number set out to help people rebuild after the tornadoes and floods that devastated those communities in May and June. Ironically we left as hurricane Ike was blasting through our own Gulf Coast. Torn about leaving, we knew there was nothing to do for our own friends but pray. As we prayed and worked last week in Iowa we were comforted to be acquiring and honing skills that we will use here in the future.

What a horrendous week it has been—between the natural disaster, Ike, and the man-made international financial. The toll came into focus for me as we witnessed the ruin that weather had brought on small businesses in Iowa—unprotected by insurance--and at the same time read that the CEO who took Lehman into bankruptcy was paid \$17,000 **per hour**. **\$17,000/hr!** That's more in a day than most of his countrymen make in a year, more in a month than a good number of us will make in a lifetime of hard work. It isn't fair. It isn't just.

And, guess what: it never was.

Jesus knew something about economic injustice. In his time, an unfathomable and unbridgeable gulf separated the very small number of super rich from the impoverished masses. Jesus and his followers lived all their lives with a lack of basic material security—food and shelter--that we cannot imagine. His prayer for daily bread was just that. He lived the reality that life is uncertain, and he knew what many of us have learned again this week: the values of the world inevitably will disappoint—be they power, prestige, or material wealth.

Jesus saw that world, those illusory values, and he saw beyond it to God's reality, to God's values, the timeless values of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom gospel he preached turned the values of the world upside down. Witness the parable we just heard, the story of the laborers in the vineyard. That story shocked his original audience and it still shocks today. Even for long-time Christians, the idea that all the workers received the same pay whether they toiled the full day or an hour or two can offend our sense of fairness, and of justice. Like last week's command to forgive without measure, this parable challenges us to cast aside the world's standards—forget keeping score, building resumes, measuring and judging ourselves or others according to some criteria of merit and achievement. Instead, Jesus invites his followers to live and participate in the reality of God's endless bounty of love, grace and forgiveness—freely and equally given to **all** God's children.

What about that promise: the last will be first and the first will be last? What is that about? And when? Is that in the afterlife? Is it only then? No. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

If that is true, here's another question that Jesus' disciples have struggled with for nearly 2,000 years. What does the kingdom look like? The fact is: we cannot see

clearly what the kingdom looks like—here and now. St. Paul was the first to admit that. So he wrote to the church in Corinth, that we see now only through a mirror, dimly.

Dimly, yes. But if we have eyes to see, from time to time we can get glimpses. One glimpse from NPR this morning. Mary Edwards, a historian interviewed from her home in Galveston was describing the wreckage of the storm to her work and her belongings; her voice only broke, though, when she spoke of the striking kindness of everyone—friends and strangers alike.

Here's one glimpse from Iowa. Some from our group helped a young man I'll call Doug to replace the roof and the siding on his house. That house he proudly built with his own hands. It had been lifted and turned by the flood waters. For three months, he has been living in his truck. When Maureen Doherty, the Episcopal priest who was our hostess, learned about Doug's situation she offered the help of "the Texans" (as we were known). Then she heard Doug's story. He had a traumatic childhood; when he was four he saw his mother murder his sister. After she was imprisoned he lived with his abusive father, leaving at 14 after his father broke his knee caps. Understandably, Doug is a loner. He had no experience of God or church.

Over the course of our week there, Doug opened up. He is a gentle man. To our surprise and delight, he quietly joined us for the two suppers given for the whole group. After one, he stayed late to visit with Maureen. As they talked, he said he might look for a church. "You have a church," Maureen told him. "Whether you come on Sunday or not, now you are a part of us and we're a part of you." Doug now has offered to help other flood victims and to come with some of them to help us rebuild on the Coast. Doug isn't alone anymore. Whether he has the words to put around it or not, he has had a glimpse of the kingdom—and so have we.

A word in closing: if we see with the world's eyes, if we measure by the world's standards, if we blindly put our faith in human institutions, we will be disappointed. There is injustice around the globe: countless good, hard-working, faithful people still struggle for their daily bread; many live under tyrannical governments like Mugabe's in Zimbabwe. There are still floods, droughts, tornadoes and hurricanes--and there always will be. Bad things will happen to good people. And there will always be times and places where human greed—whether for money or power-- overwhelms political and economic structures.

In the midst of it all, though, there will **always** be the presence of Christ, providing daily bread (even if that "bread" is hope for the morrow), bidding us to see beyond material lack to spiritual abundance, inviting us to help create the moments when the kingdom breaks in, inviting us to hold out and embody the reality of God's abiding love and presence— particularly in the worst of times.

God is here, dear ones, urging us--in the ever -timely words of our collect for the day—to "hold fast to those things that shall endure."

All glory, praise, and thanks be to God. Amen.