

1 Sermon, September 2, 2012

Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-12, Matthew 25:31-40

Title: "Stories of Faith: UMCOR"

Imagine you are living 4,000 years ago in Palestine, and just nurtured your crops through a growing season. The vegetables you may have carefully watered from your well, drawing the water up in a bucket. The wheat and millet you did all you could for, but mostly you needed the rain, and so you prayed.

Now, it's harvest time, and you harvest some of your grain and produce and give thanks to God. You bring this unspecified portion of the fruit of the soil and offer it up in the temple, along with certain words you say:

My ancestor was a wandering Bedouin. He went down to Egypt and lived there as a foreigner. But my ancestors multiplied in Egypt, all the while the Egyptians gave us hard labor. But God led us out of Egypt by mighty and wondrous deeds to a beautiful land where you could raise sheep and grow fruit trees. So, now, Lord, I bring to you the first bit of harvest that you have given me.

Then, you have a party, and sit and eat with your family, and the foreigners among you and your neighbors who have to perform priestly duties. You see, neither the foreigners nor the neighbors who perform priestly duties have any land, so they need what you can share with them.

And every third year, you also make a point to include the orphans and widows in your neighborhood, so that they have enough to eat.

It's a really interesting Bible passage from Deuteronomy. The first fruits of the harvest are to be shared. It ties together God, history and generosity.

There is a thread of generosity that runs throughout the Bible. We are generous, because God was first generous to us. It's part of our history, a history of generosity.

That's why I want to tell you about United Methodist Committee on Relief, which combines God, history and generosity, too.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief, or UMCOR, was started over 70 years ago as a response to the suffering caused by the onset of World War II. It was to serve as a "voice of conscience among Methodists to act in the relief of human suffering without distinction of race, color, or creed," according to Bishop Herbert Welch.

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Since then, UMCOR has helped survivors of earthquakes in Nicaragua, famine in Africa, and tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes in the United States. As countries such as Liberia, Rwanda, and Bosnia experienced civil wars, UMCOR was there to help affected communities rebuild homes and lives. We provided communities with training and education to help them confront hunger and poverty.

UMCOR has provided relief to survivors of earthquakes in Haiti and Chile; floods in Pakistan; and the 2011 tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear threat in Japan; our field office in Afghanistan has helped rebuild communities torn apart by decades of war, and we provided long-term recovery aid to communities in the US South devastated by hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike.

Now, of course UMCOR is active in the relief following Hurricane Isaac. Ike was in 2008, Isaac in 2012.

On Wednesday it was reported that Hurricane Isaac will only add to the [solemn anniversary of Hurricane Katrina as residents](#) of New Orleans commemorate the 1,800 killed in both Louisiana and Mississippi with the tolling of bells in New Orleans' Jackson square.

Katrina, a Category 5 storm, caused at least \$81 billion in damage in 2005. Isaac came ashore as only a Category 1, but it brought tremendous amounts of water, with flooding occurring 100 miles inland.

On Wednesday, in some nasty weather, the Memphis Annual Conference's disaster relief coordinator took bottled water, hand sanitizers, meals ready to eat and some generators to Gallman, Miss., south of Jackson, and Gulfport, Miss., near the coast.

Earlier, United Methodist Wesley Foundation students in Baton Rouge, La., had joined with volunteers to make sandbags to prepare for [Isaac's impending arrival](#).

The UMCOR Sager Brown Depot is the headquarters for UMCOR's relief-supply operations. Each year, more than 2,000 volunteers prepare about \$4 million in supplies for shipment from the Baldwin, LA facility. Locally, UMCOR Sager Brown reaches out to Baldwin neighbors through food distribution and housing rehabilitation projects, engaging volunteers in these projects that help families and the elderly.

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All through the region, United Methodists have been getting ready to help, knowing that our churches and camps will be used in the relief. One of our camps is housing power company workers come from around the country to restore power. Our churches will be places of refuge and hope.

In Florida, which escaped most of Isaac's fury, congregations in Miami were focusing on assisting Haiti, where at least 24 people died because of the tropical storm. The storm claimed the lives of five people in the neighboring Dominican Republic.

Six years ago, I went with a group of 2 other adults and 7 youth to do cleanup from Hurricane Katrina in Slidell, Louisiana, close to New Orleans. We helped restore a home of a woman who had been flooded out, doing insulation, dry walling, scraping and painting.

It was a great trip spiritually, and we saw all sorts of homes that had been devastated by flooding. The image that sticks in my mind is a 50 foot boat sitting in a residential neighborhood, having been lifted over the levee by a storm surge. And this was a year after the storm.

That organization, North Shore Recovery, was funded heavily by United Methodists, and had its offices in temporary buildings on the site of a United Methodist Church. They were still working on recovery in Slidell in 2010, five years after Katrina.

The media may have long ago forgotten the needs generated by Katrina, but the church remembers, and we continue to stay and be involved.

You can see why I say that the United Methodist Committee on Relief combines God, history and generosity. Part of that generosity is your generosity. Both our apportionments and our special giving go partly to UMCOR.

We are motivated by God's desire to care for the ones who find it hard to care for themselves. Just like in the Deuteronomy reading, the orphans and widows and foreigners are invited to take some of the harvest, God's continuing desire is that we take care of the naked, the sick and the suffering.

That's the message of Matthew 25, that the ones who care for the last, the least and the lost are actually caring for Jesus.

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"When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns,"
Deuteronomy 26:1-12, NRSV.