"Charity, Justice, and Resurrection: Hurricane Katrina and the Example of St. Dorcas"
A Sermon Delivered by M. Christian Green, J.D./Ph.D
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Today's sermon continues a project that I began last summer of examining the lives of some of the saints depicted on our church's stained-glass windows. Last summer, my sermon was on St. Martha. Today I focus on one of the so-called "lesser" saints, located to the right of Martha on the Ella Winthrop Saltonstall window in the West Transept. Our church website's online tour of the stained-glass windows notes Dorcas's alternative name of Tabitha and describes her as a "woman of good works and almsdeeds, bearing a small garment to clothe the poor." In the window above her, is the heart of charity. Indeed, Dorcas has often lent her name over the centuries to "Dorcas societies" of women pursuing charitable activities in the church.

Dorcas's story is not among our readings today. Rather, it appears in Acts 9: 36-43, where Dorcas is described as a woman "devoted to good works and charity." Interestingly, this is the one place in the New Testament where the word "charity" is used in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we use. There are important connections, to be sure, between "charity" and the theological virtue of "love" described by Paul to the Corinthians: "So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor 13:13) The message of love is found throughout the New Testament. But there are subtle differences between charity and love, between charity and almsgiving, and between charity and justice. I shall say more about these distinctions later.

In the story in Acts, Dorcas, beloved in her town of Joppa and by the widows with whom she lives, dies after a period of illness. St. Peter, passing through town at the time, hears of the situation and pays a visit to Dorcas, lying in burial preparation in the upper room of her house. Peter asks the widows to leave the room, prays beside Dorcas's body and then, using the Aramaic rather than the Greek version of her name commands, "Tabitha, get up!" She does, and is resurrected from death. Our window shows St. Peter restoring Dorcas to life in the lower frame.

Those who were present for my sermon last summer may here note some interesting connections between Martha and Dorcas. Both of them were unmarried, female servants of the church, connected to stories of resurrection—Martha through Jesus's resurrection of her brother Lazarus and then through her recognition and affirmation of Jesus's proclamation "I am the resurrection and the life."

Today's gospel reading from John highlights the theme of resurrection. In my remaining words, I would like to sketch a connection between charity and resurrection, drawing on my experiences working with others seeking to resurrect New Orleans, the Gulf Coast, and the lives of those who endured Hurricane Katrina—work that others in our congregation have also recently undertaken. The connection between charity and

resurrection is something I have been thinking about quite a bit recently in connection with two Katrina-relief work opportunities that I have had in the past year.

The first of these happened just days after Katrina hit. I happened to have a plane ticket at the time to visit my parents in Lafayette, Louisiana, two and a half hours west of New Orleans, but completely unaffected by the storm. While I was there, I worked at the Cajundome of the University of Louisiana, then home to 7,000 displaced residents of the New Orleans area. The American Red Cross, various religious and nonprofit organizations, and local government officials did a remarkably effective job in making things as comfortable as possible for those at the dome. Far from the bedlam and grim situation of the Superdome in New Orleans, the Cajundome was clean, orderly, and generally functional at meeting the needs of the evacuees. Upon departing for a more permanent shelter, one grateful resident even described it to the press as a "utopia."

My second service opportunity was with a group of fellow faculty, staff, and students from Harvard Divinity School who went down to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, for spring break this past March. Our hosts there were St. John's Episcopal Church of Ocean Springs and the Lutheran Episcopal Services in Mississippi, whose main effort is now housed at the inspiringly named Camp Victor. In the version of this sermon that will be posted on our church website, I have included links to the various organizations that we worked with on the trip, so that you can take a look at the great work of rebuilding that they are doing. The trip was, as others who have been down there have attested, an eye-opening and transformative experience. But we also found that our work raised difficult questions about charity, justice, and what it will take from all of us to resurrect that devastated region.

Though ours was a politically diverse group, some of the questions were inevitably political in nature. There we were working among many other "thousand points of light" as the first President Bush called charitable agencies in his day--individuals and organizations from around the country who came to assist in the aftermath of the disaster. Notably low-profile was the presence of the federal government. Surely, no one would want any of the religious, non-profit, and other charitable "points of light" to go dim or burn out, but it did raise questions for many of us about the adequacy of our government's response.

There is a principle in Christian social ethics known as "subsidiarity"—basically the idea that smaller units of society who are closer to a problem should play the primary role in resolving it. The corollary, often forgotten by political conservatives who appropriate this principle, is that where local units of society cannot do it alone, larger units of society—really the whole society—should pitch in and help. We came to think of ourselves as "standing in the gap" bridging the space between the reality of the response that was happening and our hope for what we would like to happen. But there were lingering questions about whether our charitable efforts were really creating the conditions for justice and what the proper roles of government and charitable organizations should be.

Other questions revolved around what some in our group came to characterize as "hierarchies of need." One of the eerie things about working in the Gulf Coast after the disaster was the low level of rebuilding going on in the poorest communities. Many of those folks were simply not there, having become part of that diaspora of Katrina refugees, who have had to resettle in other parts of the country. They cannot afford even to return, much less rebuild. Many of the folks we were helping were solidly middle-class, and higher in some cases. Shouldn't we have been digging out the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans? Shouldn't those who can afford it be hiring local people to help them out, thereby creating work opportunities? We were told, and by all accounts it was true, that many of the folks that we were helping, eight months after the storm, had been initially hesitant to ask for help, thinking that others were worse off and needed it more. Further, the severity of the damage and cost of repair is more than even middle-class homeowners can afford in our increasingly house-rich, cash and savings-poor society. A road trip to the Lower Ninth Ward and surrounding neighborhoods with an HDS alumna and her interfaith community redevelopment organization in New Orleans revealed a stark wasteland in which rebuilding was only beginning. We decided that need was need, wherever you find it, and that our task was to meet the need before us in people of all socioeconomic classes.

After we returned and as we were undertaking a process of group reflection on the meaning of our experience, one member of our group circulated an e-mail message that someone had forwarded to her in the days immediately after Katrina. She cautioned that the content was disturbing--but it also revealed an important aspect of charity that I continue to think about today. The author of the original message was a Houston man who had apparently shown up to do volunteer work at Houston's Astrodome in the days after refugees began to arrive from New Orleans. Many of them had endured some of the most horrific experiences in the entire Katrina disaster in the dark and dirty confines of the Superdome. To describe this population as severely traumatized simply does not do justice to their experience. But apparently, the Houston man, who declared that he had decided to volunteer to get his "warm fuzzies," as he described it, had very high expectations. Specifically, he wanted gratitude. When he did not get enough of it, the result was a lengthy e-mail tirade against the ungrateful beneficiaries of his "goodwill." Simply put, the man revealed himself to be not only incredibly self-centered, but also incredibly racist, using terms that I shall not repeat here.

My initial response to this man and his message was one of disgust and revulsion. Yet I continued to think about it in relationship to a research project on evolution of altruism that has been going on at Harvard Divinity School. The rise of genetic science has us looking for biological and genetic explanations for just about everything—the gay gene, the God gene, and in the case of the Harvard project, the "good" gene. Research on the altruism—conventionally defined as unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others--seeks to determine whether there is something that can "hardwire" us, as the evolutionary psychologists say, to do the good works for which saints like Dorcas are examples. More and more, evolutionary psychology is shedding light on the complex mixture of motives—self-regard and other-regard—that underlie most human activities.

In recounting to this group the story of the Houston man, whom I have come to think of as the "reluctant altruist," we agreed that there was something morally significant about the fact that this man showed up to volunteer at all—his overwhelming negativity and expressed racism notwithstanding. We reflected on this small seed of goodwill in him—compromised as it was by concern for what he would get out of it and whether this would be recognized and recompensed by others. Where was the justice in the Houston man's attempt at charity? Was it even charity in the first place? How had his charity come to be so tainted by the injustice of racism? Should he have been there at all? What could he have achieved if his desire to help had not been socially deformed and morally misdirected by excessive self-interest and no small amount of racism? What can society do to nurture and direct the desire to do good?

At least one biblical scholar sees a similar misdirection--misinterpretation, really—afoot in the way the story of Dorcas has come down to us. The clear affirmation of good works in her story does not sit well with all branches of the Christian tradition—particularly those who follow Martin Luther's emphasis on faith over works. Of course, our Lutheran brothers and sisters also subscribe to the important ethical principle of "faith active in love." But the term "charity" has also become subject to multiple interpretations. For example, some strands of the Christian tradition at various points in history have made much—perhaps too much--of the distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. This distinction still pervades many of our political discussions of welfare reform, budgetary priorities, and allocation of social services. At other times, the Christian tradition has more closely adhered to the linkage that our fellow Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Islam, make between charity and justice. In that wider understanding of charity, individual deeds such as almsgiving, are related to a larger sense of justice, righteousness, and healing the brokenness of sin, thereby restoring the wholeness of the world. Charity and justice, in this sense, are about a much wider sense of relationship between our neighbors and ourselves. Justice is a relationship that demands something of all of us--individuals, churches, relief organizations, and the government, all working together. Charity and justice go hand in hand—and neither is sufficient on its own. Both are essential to the resurrection and redemption of the world around us. If the story of Dorcas inspires us to charity and causes us to reflect on the relationship of charity and justice in the world around us, particularly in the midst of situations like Hurricane Katrina, then it is a very good example, indeed.

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