



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Aug. 17, 2007

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Last Wednesday evening we had just finished supper and tuned into the six o'clock news from our home in the Twin Cities. Suddenly, the broadcast was interrupted by breaking news. There had been some kind of accident or explosion on the 35 W bridge near downtown Minneapolis. As more information came in, we quickly learned that the entire bridge had collapsed, and that there were many people in the river. The next few hours unfolded the horror of the scene, with death and injury and trauma as a common theme.

Many of us in those early hours worried if any of our family or friends had been on the bridge at the time of the collapse. Almost all of us knew people who traveled the bridge every day, sometimes multiple times. Fortunately, as the phone calls went back and forth, we learned that our family and friends had missed being on the bridge at 6:06 pm, although some of them had been there just a few minutes earlier.

Indelible images were etched into our minds and hearts as we watched. A school bus, which was transporting more than sixty students, now teetering on the edge of disaster; a large truck burning out of control; cars everywhere twisted and smashed like children's toys; rescue workers combing the wreckage both on land and in the water. The entire metro area seemed to be in a state of shock, not really believing what had happened. Just about everyone interviewed was quoted as saying, "This is surreal."

But midst the nightmare, one consistent theme began to emerge early on and then gained even more attention as the days went by. It was what the first responders had done - a magnificent and heroic thing on behalf of the injured and dying. Countless numbers of unnamed volunteers who just happened to be in the area rushed to the scene and proceeded to pull people out of harms' way they bound up the wounded, jumped into the river to pull people out of cars, and comforted the afflicted with words and touch.

Story after story was recounted about how people put all fear aside and risked life and limb to rush to the aid of those who were in trouble. Certainly one of the reasons why the death toll was so much less than anticipated was because of the incredible bravery and compassion and courage of those who came first upon the event. They reached out to people they had never seen before and most likely would never see again.

The question then was asked by many, "Why do people act like this? Why do people risk everything in order to help people they do not even know? What causes certain people to act in a sacrificial manner?" Some people suggest it was "Minnesota Nice," which, I am sure, would be identical to "Iowa Nice" if some such tragedy happened here, but I think it is much more than that.

When many of the rescuers were interviewed, they said that they had been raised with an ethic of caring, of compassion, of helping those in need. Many of them were raised in smaller communities where helping one's neighbor is ingrained early. Others attributed their actions to a strong religious faith. Many simply said their response was almost visceral. When you see someone in the river fighting to live you just dive in; you really don't wait to analyze why you are doing this. But it seemed so counter-cultural in a way, with so many stories repeated today where people just stand by or turn away when someone is in crisis.

A few days after the bridge collapse, Minnesota Public Radio hosted a most incisive program on the issue of compassion and helping those in need. The question of the day was framed in this manner, "What causes people to respond in a time of crisis? What is it in their background or lives which moves them to action?" Two guests were featured on the program, each with a unique perspective.

The first resource person was Samuel Oliner, now emeritus professor of sociology at Humboldt State University, and founder/ director of the Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute. Dr. Oliner

told a truly horrifying story of his own young life. He was just twelve years old when the Nazis ordered his family out of their home in southern Poland; all Jews were rounded up. They spend the next two months in a small room, and then the Gestapo came back and forced everyone into military trucks. Young Samuel was hidden on the roof of the building by his parents and several hours later he escaped. Several hours later a thousand strong Jews were executed.

Samuel wandered the countryside for several days, hiding in haystacks and taking food from gardens. Finally he showed up at the home of a friend of his parents, a woman of faith named Balwina. She immediately took him in, hugged him and offered him a place to stay. She also decided that Samuel must change his name to Juzek Polewski, and he needed to act like he was Catholic rather than Jewish. So she taught him the catechism, the Lord's Prayer, to genuflect and make the sign of the cross. Balwina truly was risking her life to save the life of young Samuel.

When the area was finally liberated in 1945 Samuel immigrated to the United States where he decided to become a sociologist. In that role he has spent his entire adult career working to understand what motivates altruism such as Balwina demonstrated. What causes people to be selfless without any external reward? What brings out the heroic in people and causes them to even risk their lives?

Professor Oliner discovered that altruistic people are deeply empathetic. They could not just stand by and watch others suffer. They have internalized the ethic of social responsibility and usually credit parents or other influential adults. Such people have a huge capacity for love and compassion. And quite often it is religious or spiritual beliefs which drive such behavior, as they regard all people as children of God, worthy of life and protection and love.

The other speaker was Stephen Post, who with Jill Neimark wrote a book entitled *When Good Things Happen to Good People*. Post has served as a bioethicist in the medical school at Case Western University for the past 19 years, and has spent much of this time securing funds in order to test how altruism, compassion and giving affects peoples' lives and well being.

What he discovered should not surprise any of us. He

found that generous behavior has huge upside results for people. It greatly reduces depression, and it promotes much better physical and mental health from childhood all the way into late adulthood. He found that volunteerism on the part of older adults significantly reduces mortality. Giving to others enables people to forgive themselves for mistakes, a key element in well being. And praying for others reduces health difficulties among older adults, among those doing the praying.

Post and Neimark devote a chapter to each of the ten ways of giving to others that have proven to give people increased life satisfaction: Nurturing, celebration, forgiveness, courage to speak out, humor, respect, compassion, loyalty, creativity and listening.

Professor Post concludes: It is abundantly clear from a number of studies that people who live generous lives also live happier lives. Science demonstrates that the transformation toward greater love that is taught in religion has an empirical quality (what a surprise!).

In fact, over the past decade, some 500 studies have shown the power of unselfish love. Whole neighborhoods where the highest level of volunteerism takes place had much less crime, better schools, and happier and healthier residents. Numerous studies on the brain confirm that there is such a thing as a "helper's high", a warm glow that people receive from helping activities, all of which contributes to health. This glow is more than just chemicals. It has a spiritual component that enlivens and elevates this kind of natural substrate.

We all know this, of course, but it is good to be reminded. Jesus says that it is more blessed to give than receive. We are told right away in Genesis that we were blessed in order that we might be a blessing. The more we give the more we receive; what we reap, we shall also sow. Altruism, helping those in need, enhances not only the health and well-being of the person being helped, but also of the person doing the helping. Self-pity is very difficult when we are wiping away the tears of someone else.

So the next time you see someone in need, someone who needs compassion and love and even rescue, don't hesitate. Altruism is good for both body and spirit. If you don't believe, read again the *Sermon on the Mount*, the most powerful description of the power of such a response.