

Oh God of compassion, make us instruments of your hope, justice, and love. Amen.

### **Let Mutual Love Continue**

Five years ago, Hurricane Katrina battered the Gulf Coast. In NO, what started as a natural storm, became a manmade disaster when the levees broke. 80% of the city was under water. New Orleans, the city of the Big Easy, lay in ruin.

People who were able to evacuate, were stuck in bumper to bumper traffic for miles and hours.

People who could not, were stranded on roofs and in attics, hospitals, the superdome and outside the convention center. These faces were overwhelmingly poor and black, the very old and the very young. They were hung out to dry.

1,800 people died. 100s of 1,000s lost their homes and apartments. One million were displaced. Millions more lost confidence in our government's commitment and ability to protect citizens, and to help them get their lives, homes, and the city's infrastructure back.

**Irma Thomas, New Orleans Soul Queen, wrote Back Water Blues after Katrina. Some of the lyrics go like this.**

**I woke up this morning, couldn't even get out of my door.  
Enough trouble to make a poor woman wonder where she's  
going to go.  
He rowed a little boat about 5 miles across the pond.  
I packed up all my clothes and they rowed me along.  
I went out and I stood on a high old lonesome hill.  
Back Water Blues have caused me to pack my bags and go.  
Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more.**

The writer to Hebrews wrote, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

What is mutual love anyway?

The people of Chicago and New Orleans share a mutual love for jazz and blues, winning footballs teams (Go Who Dat Nation), great food, and neighborhood celebrations.

**But I don't think this is the mutual love the writer to Hebrews had in mind.**

We also share a mutual love for living near water. Lake Michigan and Lake Ponchartrain. The Chicago River and the mighty Mississippi. Lagoons and bayous.

**And I don't think this is the mutual love the writer had in mind.**

In the days and months following the levee failure and flooding, there were stark examples of what mutual love is not.

Incidents of police brutality and cover-ups. The officers who shot at unarmed civilians, as they crossed the Danzinger Bridge, leaving four black people wounded and two dead.

The president's public praise for Mike Brown, FEMA Director, in the midst of the federal government's massive failed response. 'You're doing a heck of a job, Brownie.'

Televangelists who believed the destruction was caused by God's wrath and judgment on America. [Pat Robertson](#) linked Katrina and terrorist attacks to legalized abortion. Franklin Graham who preached at Jerry Falwell's church, and said, and I quote, "There's been satanic worship. There's been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring revival. God has a plan. God has a purpose."

Fraudulent contractors who demanded money up front and never did the work or did such shoddy work that had to be redone.

So what then is mutual love?

From our 4 and ½ year ministry in NO, and the very gracious hospitality we experience when there, I believe that mutual love is not something we feel. It what we do. It is how we act. It is hard work. Sometimes it is palpable. Sometimes it seeps into our souls when we least expect it. Mutual love is what happens when strangers trust us with their sacred stories. Mutual love is when we make ourselves vulnerable by letting others inside our safe walls. When we open our own selves and our hearts to trust God about what happens next. Mutual love is God at work.

In the NO context, mutual love is the “He” in Backwater Blues when he rows his little boat across the pond to rescue the poor old woman.

Mutual love is when Elvia James, senior warden from our partner parish St. Luke’s who is with us today, rounded up 13 parishioners and led them to safety before the flood. It is what she continues to do, day in and day out, when she is a priest-like presence to others in the absence of a priest and rector. She keeps St. Luke’s strong through their good friday and resurrection faith journey. Mutual love is what happens when we worship with St. Luke’s and join hands as we sing The Lord’s prayer the St. Luke’s way.

Mutual love is when Deacon Elaine Clements, started the murder ministry 3 years ago. She and others continue to deliver roses, along with the names and ages of murder victims she does not know, to the mayor, DA, Chief of Police and City Council. Each week she sends the names and ages of these same victims to 20 churches who pray for them, their families, and the perpetrators.

Mutual love is when All Saints made the commitment to be in this ministry for the long haul, not knowing where it would lead. When we continue to make good on that commitment by building meaningful

partnerships with St. Lukes and ECS. We have organized 8 rebuild trips involving a total of 70 folks. We contribute to the St. Luke's rector fund through our capital campaign. And, we have sponsored two wildly successful Gumbo Stomp fundraisers, to purchase materials to rebuild two houses.

We have showed up and when we do, we experience a radical hospitality that takes us by surprise, humbles us, and invites us to return again and again.

Our work in NO has changed over time. At first it was response and recovery. We cleaned out and we cleaned up. We joined with others in a ritual that was new to us-the sacred ritual of gutting houses.

Now our work is re-building and renewal. We put up and we put down. We join with others in a different ritual-the sacred ritual of putting broken houses back together again. We partake in the NO culture we have come to love. We participate in celebration rituals-Elvia's house blessing and Gillian's 50th birthday at the Jones family home we drywalled.

October 25 we will return again. Why?

Because we cannot forget the people we meet. They have not forgotten us.

People who trust us with their most intimate and sacred stories.

Of hurriedly leaving or being left behind.

FEMA frustrations and long lines.

The new normal and losses that continue to take a quiet emotional and physical death toll these days.

These are people who believe in the power of prayer. I remember them when I don't.

These are people of faith who proclaim that God is good and good all the time. I remember them when I have my doubts.

These are the people who have shown us strangers God's gift of hospitality in unexpected places ...Home Depot, the airport, grocery stores in their houses of worship, and in their homes, gutted or made whole again.

Why, because the rebuilding is not yet finished.

Today we lift up those folks who continue to have sore hearts because they still have not been able to return home.

From Elaine Clements I learned that the Lower Ninth has had only 11% of their population return, most of that in the slightly more affluent Holy Cross section.

There are still areas of the city that are very vacant, second only to Detroit in the numbers of derelict housing structures.

The Gulf Oil spill has had a huge negative impact, both financially and emotionally. Another manmade disaster hanging folks out to dry. The spill has affected every area of the already struggling economy: oil, fishing, tourism and shipping.

While an escrow fund has been established by BP for the Gulf region, funds to address the economic needs of south Louisiana have dried up.

The spill has delayed progress on protection of the wetlands.

We hope that the marshes have not been permanently damaged, that a marsh burning may rid them of oil and start the growth process again in the spring. In the meantime, thousands of sea creatures and birds have been killed. And, it is not known if the oyster beds will ever recover, since they are filter feeders. One of the largest oyster shucking companies with a 100 year plus history, has closed its doors, laying off over a hundred workers.

The status of the levees, flood walls, and pumps is uncertain. The "official" answer is that the system is close to the previous Category 3 protection levels, with some improvements beyond that. However, other experts dispute this claim.

Let mutual love continue. The city has not yet been made whole.. Let mutual love continue. We are in relationship with folks in NO, who once strangers, are our brothers and sisters. They are our hope and we are theirs. Together we are God's hope for building what Dr. Martin Luther King would call the "beloved community" of NO. Let mutual love continue. It is what we do. It is how we act. It is God at work in our lives and the world. Amen.