

Disaster Maps

Luke 4:14-21 | 1/27/2019

We watched it unfold in real time on our television screens. Hurricane Katrina had just slammed into the Gulf Coast. Cameras mounted on helicopters showed the desperate plight of those caught in the floodwaters. Some had fled to their rooftops because there was nowhere else to go. Words painted on bedsheets signaled their despair: “Send Help.”

In a massive disaster like Katrina, one of the greatest challenges for aid agencies is finding displaced people who need to be rescued. Ordinary phone lines are down, and the few cell towers still operating are overwhelmed with voice calls. Even when voice calls do get through, the survivors placing them are often on the move. For rescue workers, knowing yesterday’s — or even the last hour’s — location is of little use.

But voice calls are not the only communications carried over cell towers. Many social-media users, such as Facebook customers, have their location services turned on. Their mobile phones are constantly sending identifying signals to cell towers, and Facebook’s servers are triangulating their location. Often, those tiny pips of data get through when voice calls do not.

Realizing the value of their location data to rescue workers, Facebook’s Data For Good Division has implemented a service called Disaster Maps. During a disaster, Facebook aggregates the location data of all its customers near ground zero and reports overall trends to government agencies and NGOs coordinating the emergency response.

The National Guard needs to know where to deploy its big-wheeled rescue vehicles. Paramedics need to know where to position their rigs for the quickest response time. The Red Cross needs to plot the busiest crossroads to set up their mobile soup kitchens. Disaster Maps tells officials in disaster-response command centers where the largest migrations of survivors are headed.

Embarking on his new ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus rolls out his own disaster map.

Reading from the Isaiah scroll, he declares that the Holy Spirit has anointed him “to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” For these benighted children of God, his mission is to proclaim good news, announcing “the year of the Lord’s favor” (vv. 18-19).

It’s clear from the gospel record that throughout his ministry, Jesus is guided — as though by some spiritual homing beacon — to those who are in greatest need of his healing touch and loving words. Centuries before our smartphone era, he demonstrates an unerring awareness of where the hurting people are and what they most desperately need.

Our Lord is no mere aggregator of data. He’s a hands-on healer and helper, a spiritual — sometimes even material — first responder. His feeding of the 5,000 would have left even the most efficient Red Cross canteen operator standing slack-jawed in awe.

By his example, he calls us to become first responders, too. Remember his words to Peter in that miraculous scene on the seashore following his resurrection? After feeding his friends barbecued filet of fish Jesus asks the fisherman a simple question. He repeats it three times for emphasis. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” “Then feed my lambs” (John 21:15).

As Jesus prepares to depart this earth, he knows his days of grilling fish will soon be over. But his mission to the lost and lonely, the homeless and the hurting, remains more vital and more urgent than ever.

“You’ve got to form your own disaster map, Peter,” we can almost hear him saying. “I need you to plot out where my needy children are huddling in despair, and then go find them and do exactly as I’ve done! Remember what I told you about the shepherd who left the 99 in the pasture to pull the one lost sheep out of the thicket [15:4]? *First*, you need to know *where* to find that sheep. Then you need to go *find* it!”

The first response to a disaster is often a compassionate, rescuing response. Yet, after the floodwaters have subsided or the wildfire has burned itself out, another sort of response is called for: the preventive response.

It does little good to rebuild homes on a floodplain if the new homes are not raised up high enough to withstand the next flood. After the mine closes or the factory is boarded up in an economically depressed community, the first-response services of a food pantry may be much appreciated, but they're not a permanent solution to hunger.

There's a little parable attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. about a man who was relaxing beside a stream one day. He looked up and noticed a badly injured man floating down the water toward him. Of course he waded into the water and pulled the man out, bandaging his wounds. Then another wounded man floated down to him, and then another.

It became apparent that some evil people upstream were beating and robbing these innocents and casting them into the stream. What is the most faithful response to such evil? Martin asked his listeners. To keep on pulling the victims out of the water one by one and treating their wounds, or to hike upstream and fight the injustice?

Unlike Facebook's Disaster Maps — which rightly assume that hurricanes and earthquakes are forces of nature beyond our control — there are some human disasters Christ's church can and should directly address in the form of social action. This kind of disaster we can fight and sometimes even prevent.

Many of the great social-reform movements of past years have been spearheaded by Christian disciples.

The abolition of slavery is a notable example. Public-school history textbooks — all too often scrubbed of all religious content — won't always say it, but the abolitionist movement would never have succeeded were it not for people of faith. England's William Wilberforce, who labored for decades to convince Parliament to ban slavery in the British Empire, was a devout evangelical Christian. So were the Quakers and others who operated Underground Railroad stations. So, too, was Presbyterian minister Elijah Parish Lovejoy who was murdered in Alton, Illinois, defending his printing press from an anti-slavery mob.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s own civil rights movement is the most notable example in recent memory of people of faith rallying to fight social ills. The recent resurgence of white-supremacy groups shows how much that work continues to be needed today.

People of faith — especially those of the younger generation — are *deeply engaged today in Earth care* organizations that are courageously naming and fighting the causes of climate change.

And sometimes our response as Christians to those affected by certain sorts of human disasters can only be to say, as our Lord so often did, "Your faith has made you well: now, go and sin no more."

Another internet mapping resource many people use is Google Maps. Those who are not digital natives, who remember the old world of folding gas-station road maps, continue to be impressed by the way that Google Maps can zoom in, with just a few mouse-clicks, from a very large-scale view to a local perspective. Once the map is zoomed in to a given locality, it's possible to switch over into Street View. That's when Google Maps really shines. Because of its huge investment photographing nearly every street in the country, Street View makes it seem like we're really there, approximating what we're likely to see from our own car window.

Disaster maps are fine, but if we're to be faithful followers of Christ, we need to get to street view eventually, and not the one that appears on our computer screen, either. The *real* street view is indispensable, the one we can only obtain by going to the place of need and doing what we can to help.

Novelist and activist Elie Wiesel captures this prophetic imperative in these words from his December 10, 1986, acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize: "As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them; that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours; that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*. The Spirit of the Lord has anointed *us* to servant ministry. So, go. Follow the disaster map. But when you get to the place of need, set your map aside, roll up your sleeves, get to work and labor as our Lord calls us to do.

Pastor Keith