Reflecting Pool (Lk. 10.25-37)
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But wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with a story.

Everyone knew the storm was coming. It was all over the news. People were talking about it on the radio and television. The newspaper carried satellite images of its great vortex, hundreds of miles of pinwheeling clouds moving toward the Louisiana coast. Neighbors discussed the storm nervously, and many of them began to pack their belongings and join the widening caravan out of the state. Already the sky was darkening and the air was changing and everyone knew the storm was coming. Some lacked the money to leave, others the mobility. Still others stayed behind to try and protect their homes and investments, hoping to weather the storm with plywood to shield the windows and buckets to catch the rainwater. Abdulrahman Zeitoun found himself in the latter camp.[1] A Syrian-American who had lived in New Orleans for many years, he had fallen in love with the city. Zeitoun owned a successful painting and contracting business, and, through it, he had learned the city's people and neighborhoods intimately. He had met and married his wife, Kathy, in Louisiana, and his three daughters had been born there. It was as much a home to him now as his native Jableh, a village of fishers, halfway around the world, also by the sea. In addition to running the contracting business, Zeitoun had also invested in a number of rental properties, and it was with his home, work sites, and rental properties in mind that he decided to stay and weather the storm. He would need to be on hand to check on his tenants, assess the damage, and begin making repairs as soon

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[1] See Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2009).

as the worst had passed. As his family packed their minivan and prepared to drive to Baton Rouge, Zeitoun made sure he had enough food and materials to wait out the wind and water.

At first blush, Hurricane Katrina was like any number of storms that had come through Louisiana during the years that Zeitoun had lived there. During the course of a long night, the winds howled, branches bent and broke, glass windows shattered, and Zeitoun moved through his home placing buckets beneath the larger leaks until he could get a look at the roof in the morning. It was a working, sleepless night, but, all things considered, it had gone well. When the light of day broke in the gray sky, the rain had lightened to a drizzle and the streets were already beginning to drain. Zeitoun spent the day checking his home and neighborhood and preparing for the patch up work that lay ahead. But the next morning brought something for which he and the city were completely unprepared. You know the story.

As retold by novelist Dave Eggers, when Zeitoun woke the next morning, "He sat up and looked down through the window that faced the backyard. He saw water, a wide sea of it. It was coming from the north. It flowed into the yard, under the house, rising quickly. He couldn't make sense of it. The day before, the water had receded, as he had expected it to, but now it had returned, far stronger. And this water was different from the murky rainwater of the day before. This water was green and clear. This was lake water."[2] Zeitoun knew what this meant right away. He knew that the levees had broken, knew that the water would keep coming, knew that he had to get everything of value to the second floor quickly. He worked feverishly, wading through his living room even as

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[2] Ibid., 95.

he began to worry about what might be happening to others in the city. After all, he lived in a two-story house on ground that was relatively high for New Orleans. What of all the people in single-story homes in the low-lying flats? Zeitoun worked and worried all day, trying to salvage what he could. At one point he paused and watched the clear, green water rising up the walls of his living room. It struck him as strangely beautiful, the way the surface divided and reflected everything, a slow moving mirror now running through his home, his neighborhood, his city. After dark, this surreal quality vanished and was replaced by the slog and slosh of more work before he closed his burning eyes for a few hours of sleep. He knew that the morning would be unlike any other.

The next day Zeitoun woke and began a new work. He retrieved an old canoe that he had bought second hand, climbed into it, and began to paddle down the street to check on his neighbors. In the hours that followed, he would find himself coasting quietly toward second-story windows to converse with a friend stuck in his bedroom, paddling past balconies where people exchanged greetings and asked each other if they were set for food and water, and tying up at one of his rental properties, where, miraculously, a working telephone still existed. In Dave Eggers' account of Zeitoun's first days after the storm, he offers one story after another of how Zeitoun and other New Orleanians helped each other. They moved through the city in small craft, listening for the sounds that would lead them to the places where help was needed. Zeitoun's canoe was particularly well suited for the work. As he glided down the streets without the noise of an outboard, he could hear the faint voices of people calling for help and the cries of hungry animals left behind. For days, Zeitoun and others picked people up and dropped them onto higher ground, where they could be evacuated from the city. Zeitoun also took to delivering

meat from his freezer to the dogs on his block. Every morning they would greet him with tails wagging and he would tell them not to worry that he'd be back again the next day.

I would like to tell you that this is how the story ends, or rather how it continues, with a band of neighbors taking care of each other during the worst of times. But the truth of Zeitoun's story is more complicated than that. For, while he appeared to his neighbors to be something of a good Samaritan, tirelessly paddling his canoe through the city offering aid and comfort, he appeared to others to be nothing more than a suspicious Syrian, a Muslim in a post-9/11 world who had disobeyed the order to leave the city. A week after the hurricane hit, heavily-armed government officers entered one of Zeitoun's rental properties and took him and three other men away. They were accused of being a terrorist cell, sent to a detention camp, and then moved to a maximum security prison. They were not presented with specific charges or evidence, they were not given access to an attorney, and none of the men were ever allowed to make a phone call. In short, they were disappeared.

But wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with a story.

There was a man who was going down a very dangerous road, traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell into the hands of robbers. The man was beaten by his assailants and left for dead, lying there by the side of the road. A number of other travelers had chosen to take that road and saw, as they did, the man who had been hurt. One of them was a priest and another was a Levite, both high ranking religious officials. Yet they moved to the other side of the road and simply kept moving, leaving the man to his fate. Then came a Samaritan, we are told, who was moved with pity. He tended the

man's wounds, put him on his animal, and brought him to an inn where he might recover. The Samaritan left money with the innkeeper to cover the man's expenses and vowed to return and pay any further bills. Jesus told this story to the Torah scholar, the lawyer who had asked him a question, and then said, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?" The answer was obvious.

The story is actually a very simple one. It is the kind of story you could tell a child, the kind of story we tell our children in this place, hoping that they will spot the apathy that we mean to steer them away from and the compassion that we hope to inculcate. Yet the simple story has at least a few more layers to it, the first of which being the idea that there was a historical enmity between Samaritans and Jews. Jesus, speaking to a Torah scholar, a fellow Jew, was invoking a surprising image by suggesting that the one he perceived to his enemy was not really his enemy at all. There is another layer to the story as well, in the bitterly satiric observation that the most outwardly religious of its characters also happen to be the most callous, scurrying past actual human need on their way to something that they have apparently deemed more important. These are interesting layers, to be sure, but, in a way, they are merely the ripples at the surface of a teaching with great depth. If we look through the surface, we'll find just beneath it a number of much more personal questions waiting for us. They are questions about what each one of us might do if and when we are faced with a similar situation. They are questions about the ways we choose to justify our own inaction. They are questions about the possibility of waking up to the need that is all around us and doing something. Something to help ourselves. Something to help our neighbors. Something to help our

world. Because even now the bandits are descending. The water is rising. And not enough help is on the way.

Today marks four years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast. And it seems to me that the way we tell that story may be similar to the way we understand the parable that Jesus offered the lawyer. We may understand it in rather black and white terms, some of which are appropriate, as we look back and judge acts to be compassionate or cruel, weighing the range of human responses to a city's trauma. It seems more than fair to say that the institutions of government badly failed the people, that poor people and people of color were disproportionately affected, and that, in some way, the storm brought many of our country's historic wounds to the surface. In the wake of the wind and rain, we saw, through the clear lake water, images of the historic oppression that has been a part of our national story. Perhaps just as badly, we saw images of the marginalization that continues to be a part of our story. We saw then, and can still see now, a portrait of division based on race, class, and privilege in America. Everyone knew the storm was coming. But not everyone could get out. Four years on the wounds are not healed. Four hundred years on they remain. And with them the story's most pressing and personal questions about what each of us might do to tend the wound, to pick up a sister or brother, to pay the tab that is owed, to act with faith and conviction.

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Abdulrahman Zeitoun could not remember feeling a stronger sense of purpose than he felt after the storm. He believed that somehow his choice to stay and care for his home

and business, a choice that had turned into the daily caring for his neighbors, was now reflective of a cause greater than his own. During evening prayers that first week, he knelt on the roof of his home, surrounded by water reflecting a starry sky, and he thanked Allah that he could be of use.

After a month of imprisonment without charges, Zeitoun's family were finally able to find him through the tip of an anonymous volunteer at the prison, a small-time Samaritan, you might call him, who had seen Zeitoun and picked up the telephone. Afterwards, Zeitoun was released to begin the slow work of physical and psychological healing after all that he'd been through in the city and the prison. At the writing of this sermon, he is now back in New Orleans, helping his neighbors to rebuild. To date, Zeitoun and his workers have restored or rebuilt 114 homes.[3] Every morning they get up and go back to work. Yet he still remembers the days just after the storm, the moments when the action required was so clear. Dave Eggers writes, "Zeitoun thinks of the simple greatness of [his] canoe, of the advantages of moving quietly, of listening carefully."[4]

Perhaps that is all the rabbi was trying to teach us with his story, the advantages of moving quietly and listening carefully. Perhaps he knew that if we slow down enough to look beneath the surface, to see and hear what is there, we will find reflected back the sisters and brothers that are ours and the work that we still have to do.

May it be so with us.

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[3] Ibid., 333.

[4] Ibid., 331.