

This past week I had the opportunity to meet Jonathan Reckford. Jonathan Reckford is the CEO of Habitat for Humanity. When Jonathan Reckford came on board at Habitat about 6 years ago, the ministry was in crisis. And this crisis was followed by another crisis.

The crisis that Reckford inherited was a crisis in leadership. As many of you know, Habitat for Humanity was begun by a man named Millard Fuller. Fuller was an amazing person. Fuller was a high profile lawyer who became disgruntled with the high flying lifestyle that he was leading. He faced a personal crisis. He ended up on a farm in Southwest Georgia called Koinonia. Koinonia Farms was begun as a place where white people and black people would live and work together and overcome racial hostility in 1960s South Georgia. While spending time on this farm and in prayer and Bible study, Fuller caught vision of a housing ministry that would transform that county and then expand across the country and into some 80 or so other countries.

Habitat for Humanity is now the largest builder in the US, the 6th largest builder in the world, and is the 2nd most recognized non-profit organization in the world. Fuller began and led something that has become an amazing witness and ministry. But Fuller was not perfect. Charges of an autocratic leadership style from employees and then charges of inappropriate sexual intimidation led the board of Habitat for Humanity to dismiss him as its president. It was a painful end to his time with Habitat.

So Jonathan Reckford entered into this time at Habitat when they were in crisis. That was crisis #1. But then a couple of months into his time at Habitat Hurricane Katrina and then Rita blew through the Gulf Coast Region. These hurricanes leveled homes and suddenly a Habitat affiliate that was used to building a couple of houses a year was being asked to produce 10 to 20 times as many houses. It was a moment of great crisis. But as Jonathan Reckford shared with our group on Wednesday of this week, crisis can lead to division. Or crisis can create opportunity.

For Habitat for Humanity, the crisis in leadership and the crisis of two Hurricanes became an opportunity. The ministry and its leaders had to first admit that there were problems in the ministry. They did that. And they began to correct those ministry problems. But then the leadership of Habitat saw this crisis as an opportunity to implement some changes that they would have had a harder time implementing without these crises. The crises in the organization became an opportunity for growth.

The change that Habitat initiated as a result of their crisis is what some of you participated in yesterday. Rather than simply building houses anywhere they could locate land, Habitat for Humanity initiated Neighborhood Revitalization. Habitat for Humanity is now involved in targeting neighborhoods and helping those neighborhoods change themselves for the better.

Yesterday Allison Creek was part of the very first Neighborhood Revitalization project here in York County. Our work yesterday originated from a crisis. And as someone who was one of the ones responsible for organizing yesterday's workday, I can tell you that we had lots of churches that told us they wanted to help and we were expecting to show up and help. But several of these churches backed out or did not show up with the promised volunteers yesterday.

There was one church that committed and showed up with what they promised. There was one church that worked hard to complete their project and most of another. The one church that came through yesterday was Allison Creek with some much appreciated assistance from Bowling Green Presbyterian. You should feel very proud of what members of this church accomplished yesterday.

Today our Scripture reading is a crisis. The crisis of the Son of God being beaten, flogged, made to carry his own cross, and then being nailed upon a cross to die a long and painful death. If that is not a crisis I don't know what real crisis is. And on top of that, we also have the crisis of the community around Jesus being left to wonder what would happen to them.

In the story we have read today, we have the story of the innocent victim named Simon of Cyrene. Simon was from Northern Africa where the country of Libya is today. We are told he was simply coming into Jerusalem from out in the country when the Roman guards force him to carry the cross for Jesus.

We are not told anything about Simon other than what we read here. His children are named which leads us to believe that they were known in some way in the community. But from what we can tell, Simon is an innocent bystander forced to carry the cross for this dead man walking.

But this crisis of the Son of God on a cross doesn't just affect Simon obviously. The crowd walking by jeer at Jesus. And then this story ends with the women watching from a distance. Mark tells us these women are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and Salome. These are some of the women who followed Jesus and had come with him to Jerusalem.

For all of these people, they are in a crisis and they see no way out of this crisis. All they can see is death and fear and defeat.

It is at this point that another character enters into this story. His name is Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph of Arimathea is a highly respected member of the Jewish Council. Working up his courage, Joseph approaches Pontius Pilate and asks him for the body of Jesus. After checking to make sure that Jesus was dead, Pilate allows Joseph to take the body.

Joseph then takes down the body, purchases a burial cloth, wraps the body in the cloth, and places him in a tomb. He rolls a large stone across the opening. In the midst of this crisis, Joseph does the miserable task and buries the body. In the midst of all of this hatred and evil and crisis of the killing of the Son of God, Joseph of Arimathea does a simple act of servanthood. He cares for the body of Christ.

You may be at a point in your life when you feel like you are experiencing a crisis. It could be any type of crisis. It could be a crisis in your family. It could be a crisis in your home, at work, at church. It could be a crisis elsewhere in your life. As you look at your crisis, I think two things stick out from this story. Is your crisis as bad as the world putting the Son of God to death? Probably not. So we need to keep our crisis in perspective.

The second thing I think we learn from this story is that in the midst of a crisis Joseph of Arimathea does a simple act of faithful servanthood. His act does not seem all that dramatic. But it was. Because he showed that in the midst of a crisis you begin with a simple act of serving another.

When you are facing a crisis in your life, our fear and anxiety can make it so that we do not know where to start. We become overwhelmed and anxious. We think that there is no solution to our crisis. But Joseph of Arimathea teaches us that in a crisis you start with simple acts of service to another. For Joseph of Arimathea, his simple act was to take care of the mangled body of Christ.

When you look at the crisis in your life, remember Joseph of Arimathea. And then ask yourself, what can I do to serve another? For Joseph, his act was to take care of the mangled body of Christ. Your act may be a similarly mundane but very important first step.

We know now that the crisis of the death of Jesus is a crisis that is used to transform the world. Because next week when we gather on Sunday in this sanctuary we will have lilies and pretty dresses and a decorated cross to show that the crisis of Good Friday has been turned into the most amazing and transforming act this world has ever known.

Jonathan Reckford from Habitat for Humanity is correct. Crisis can lead to destruction. Or crisis can be an opportunity. An opportunity to serve. AMEN.

-Text: Mark 15:21-47

-Given: April 1st, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)