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*In the aftermath of tornadoes:
Practical affection is prayer in action*

By Elise L. Moore, CSB

A series of mega-tornadoes surged through the Deep South last week, mobilizing the Southern chicken soup brigade. Southern culture in the United States includes an astounding ability to rally instantly to the aid of one's neighbor. And the definition of neighbor can be anyone within a five-state area or around the world.

Churches, volunteer organizations, and individuals organize literally overnight to provide truckloads of basic necessities including food, water, and blankets, and deliver them to affected areas. The morning after a tragedy, neighborhoods that look like a war zone will fill with organized volunteers systematically moving from house to house, offering stunned victims aid, comfort, and manual labor.

We saw it in Nashville, Tenn., after the deadly flood last May. Tuscaloosa, Ala., and every small town smashed by tornadoes is experiencing this rapid response to adversity. It probably has deep roots in Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus' words and works are a practical guide to daily life in the Bible Belt. And it was the Bible Belt most affected by this tornado outbreak. Churches dot every corner, teaching worship of God and encouraging practical expressions of Christian qualities.

What the Bible teaches about compassion, comfort, and caring isn't armchair prayer, nor is it limited to the Bible Belt. It's actual works radiating active love with God, divine Love, as their ultimate source. Mary Baker Eddy, who discovered Christian Science, defined Love, with a capital "L," as synonymous with God. And she explained Jesus' compassion in this way: "Out of the amplitude of his pure affection, he defined Love" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," p. 54).

Christian compassion is felt in the phone call checking on a friend's well-being. Comfort is felt in a hug. Caring inspires offers of assistance. You might feel far away physically and perhaps mentally, but it's likely that someone you know has a friend or relative living in the affected areas. It's not too late to pick up the phone and offer your love.

Gentle words and thoughtful consideration comfort the heart. These actions are as necessary to survivors of tragedy as food and water. Tender attention can strengthen the family facing months of displacement and uncertainty. We might not know the solutions for solving all the problems they will be facing. But we can offer solace. Quiet encouragement and praying with hope and conviction are comforting.

It is not unlike comforting those grieving for the loss of a loved one. The need for compassion and affection continues long after the moment of passing. Weeks after the passing of my mother, a cousin came to help me sort through a lifetime of treasures and memories. Efficiently organizing when my logic faltered, she quietly encouraged and patiently prodded. As I sorted through my beloved mother's papers, I would lapse into wandering memories when finding some small object. My cousin would miraculously appear at my side, gently urging me into the present. I will never forget her incredible compassion when I dissolved into sobs standing outside a movie theater. Silently embracing me, her unconditional love and understanding absorbed grief like a sponge, leaving me feeling safer and somehow less sad.

Such compassion and caring can comfort those in tornado-affected areas or in any disaster area, whether personal, community, or global.

We can find ways to embrace the needy in practical affection and humanity. Proofs of Christian compassion are seen by some as essential to eternal life. Matthew 25:34-40 gives a graphic illustration of the blessings of putting right intentions into action. Those who feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the stranger, visit the sick, have symbolically done this for our King of kings, Jesus himself. Such Christian compassion is proof of righteousness, and ushers the doer into eternal life. Good intentions and right motives are rewarded when moved from thought to action.

I will be on the phone again today contacting friends who might have friends and relatives in tornado-touched towns. As I inquire about their well-being,

I will be quietly praying for their wisdom and strength. Perhaps you will join me in finding ways for every loving thought to find compassionate expression.