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Environmental justice and The Big Flush

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As we close another hurricane season and reflect on nature's message, let us consider the human factor in the root causes of such devastation. And here we immediately face a common challenge: Sometimes the first and most difficult step in solving a problem is acknowledging that there is one.

For years, beginning with the United Church of Christ's landmark 1987 study, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States," human rights activists and environmental scholars have tried to call America's attention to the problem of environmental injustice and its most virulent expression called environmental racism. Yet, for many reasons -- political apathy, economic rationalization, moral indifference, sheer busyness -- their call has fallen on many deaf ears. America's environmental justice movement has been stuck in slow motion.

Now that The Big Easy has become The Big Flush, let's let one of Katrina's lessons spark a national awakening to the reality that millions of our poor and racial minorities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards. Katrina's "aftermath" (consider the meaning of that term) lifted the carpet under which large numbers of citizens are hidden.

Why were New Orleans' flood waters so dangerous? Because of the immediate prevalence and inadequate security of industrial toxic chemicals and waste disposal facilities in close proximity to many residents. Yet Katrina, Rita, Wilma, etc., were not unforeseen.

A common response among middle- and upper-class citizens is that, if someone doesn't like where they live, they should simply move -- "Vote with their feet!" Again, Katrina's aftermath exposed the fallacy of that logic: Many of her victims didn't even have enough resources to physically leave town for a few days before the storm, much less pack up afterwards and start a new life somewhere else. Blaming the victims is shallow at best.

Access to health care is particularly problematic, a double whammy. Not only are the poor disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, they are also least able to afford adequate medical insurance and services.

Furthermore, how well understood is it that environmental racism transcends economic class? Numerous studies have shown that, at all levels of income, black and brown Americans are disproportionately exposed relative to white citizens to toxic hazards, chemical pollution, and aesthetic degradation. Hence, the legitimate attainment of wealth cannot fully explain white Americans' higher quality of life.

Race has been shown to be an independent predictor distinct from social class, cultural values, environmental attitudes, and other factors regarding exposure to air pollution, lead poisoning in children, consumption of contaminated fish, and location near municipal landfills, incinerators and abandoned toxic waste dumps. Why? It's about power.

Though a democratic republic is clearly the best form of government, it is not perfect. In terms of influencing neighborhood quality, minorities often experience democracy as "three wolves and a lamb voting on lunch." Majority rule speaks for itself.

Even when marginalized communities attempt to participate in environmental planning processes, they are oftentimes hindered by language proficiency and intimidated by legal and scientific jargon. Allowing such factors as limited education to govern the outcome heightens the ethical injustice in the structural system.

What are we to do? First, let Katrina at least cause us to ascertain on a smaller scale what local environmental hazards threaten our neighbors down the road. Hiding behind the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) fence doesn't get us there. As individuals, we can share our concern, knowledge and resources through neighborhood associations and churches.

As voices for the voiceless, let us demand investigation by state and local environmental specialists and funding for remediation by our elected officials. Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute (Proverbs 31:8). At the federal level, inaction can no longer be justified on regional factors such as wetlands preservation, global warming and biosecurity.

Let there be a national dialogue on what constitutes a minimum baseline quality of life below which no human should live. A comprehensive baseline must include economic factors (poverty index), environmental risks (chemical and biological) and social capacity (access to adequate health care).

The late John Rawls, eminent Harvard philosopher and ethics scholar, asserted in his noted treatise, "A Theory of Justice," "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." Regarding environmental justice, Rawls said society's moral behavior can be judged by the way its worst-off are treated.

Similarly, in their concern for social justice, the Catholic Church and other denominations have long advocated the principle of subsidiarity, a norm of social ethics that those who have to live with the consequences of a decision should make the decision, or at least be directly involved in the decision-making process.

As New Orleans' population grew, were the concerns of the disenfranchised addressed during the evolution, design, maintenance and upgrading of The Big Easy and its levees? Will they be considered in its reconstruction?

Katrina exposed the hidden tragedy of quiescence: giving in, giving up, opting out by so many -- those left behind, not out of foolish stubbornness, but out of hopelessness.

As we rebuild the destruction along our Gulf Coast and ameliorate the poisonous contaminants from Katrina, may The Big Flush remove the veil of ignorance and cleanse us from the stains of environmental injustice.

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