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Puerto Rican Resiliency



MYLINDA BAITS



SUPPORT PLEDGED



For the director of music. A *maskil* of David. When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him: "David has gone to the house of Ahimelek."

Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?
Why do you boast all day long,
you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?

You who practice deceit,
your tongue plots destruction;
it is like a sharpened razor.
You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.
You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!

Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:
He will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
The righteous will see and fear;
they will laugh at you, saying,
"Here now is the man
who did not make God his stronghold
but trusted in his great wealth
and grew strong by destroying others!"

***But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever.
For what you have done I will always praise you
in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good.***

PSALM 52, NIV

I read this Psalm during my devotions a few days after returning from a week in Puerto Rico, one of many beautiful islands devastated last year by Hurricane Maria. Uncanny how apt David's description of being "thrown under the bus" by Doeg, resonated as I reflected on this past week. "To throw under the bus" is an idiomatic phrase in American English meaning to **betray a friend or ally for selfish reasons**.

A few facts you need to know about Puerto Rico are:

Puerto Rico is a commonwealth, or territory of the United States. As a territory, the U.S. federal government controls all of Puerto Rico's commerce, trade, immigration and naturalization, military affairs, mail, highways, natural resources, Social Security and federal taxation and maritime law. Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until the U.S. took control of

the island after the Spanish-American War of 1898. In 1917, the U.S. granted citizenship to Puerto Ricans through the Jones-Shafroth Act. Puerto Ricans have U.S. passports. As U.S. citizens from a U.S. territory, Puerto Ricans can freely travel and move between the island and any of the 50 states of the union.

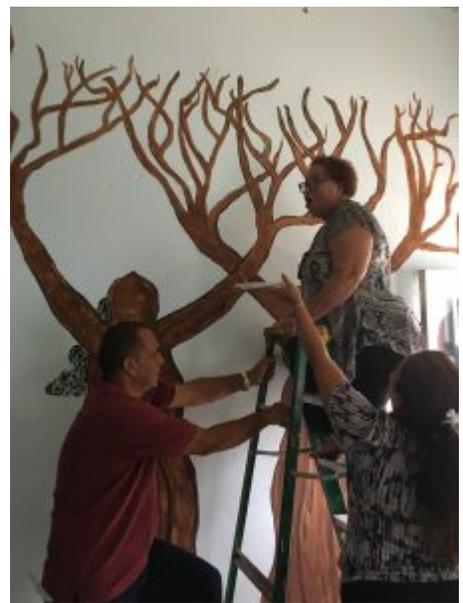
Since it is not a state, Puerto Ricans in the island don't vote in U.S. presidential elections and don't vote in U.S. congressional elections, though they do vote for presidential primaries. However, Puerto Ricans who reside in the mainland U.S. do vote in U.S. elections. Puerto Ricans who live on the island participate in local elections, and those who live in the U.S. vote in U.S. elections. (Sandra Lilley, 2017)

Many of my IM colleagues, their families and faithful American Baptist Churches in Puerto Rico were directly impacted by the devastation that Maria caused. Since the Baptist churches in Puerto Rico have historically been the most generous contributors to International Ministries and global mission, I felt moved to give back to those who have given so much and were now struggling. The Restoring, Rebuilding, Renewing Puerto Rico campaign organized by American Baptist Home Mission Society offered an opportunity to serve. I was joined by Emily Blair, Betty Utter and Wendy Wilson. Our small but mighty team of women set out with few details of what we'd be doing, but with lots of desire to listen, learn and love. We were welcomed at Iglesia Bautista Unida Vegas y Farallón by Abigail Medina-Betancourt, volunteer coordinator and Ramón, chef, church president and hospitality guru. Every detail was considered and covered from meals and bedding to bug spray and water bottles. Over dinner conversation, we heard first-hand accounts of the ravages of Maria's water and wind as well as the resiliency of the community working together to make sure everyone's safety and basic needs were met. The one year anniversary of the biggest hurricane to hit the island was bringing up emotional triggers, anxiety and the need to express, to be heard and to be honored. With another hurricane threatening to hit the island again at the end of the week, we were encouraged to be ready to leave at the first sign of danger since our safety was their priority. Thankfully, the storm moved and we were able to stay the whole week as planned.



We spent our days at the Corporación Milagros del Amor (Miracles of Love Corporation). They serve individuals or families who are homeless and those who, as a result of Hurricane Maria, are in great need. Every day they reach more than 200 people; supplying water, ready-to-eat food, groceries and basic necessities. Their Executive Director, Yamina Apolinaris, inspired us with stories of hope and healing in the midst of deep distress. CORMA, the acronym of the organization, has been dreaming of creating an eSPAcio de Mujer, a special, spa-like space for women to come together, to relax, to build relationships

and to grow and thrive. After listening, learning and falling in love with the beautifully committed team at CORMA, creativity coalesced into a mural idea that would be the centerpiece of this special space. Once the idea of three rooted, connected, and praising trees shaped by different women's bodies was presented and approved, we got to work organizing, cleaning and painting. It was amazing how our small yet energetic band of wonder women, inspired by the love and strength of our new friends and infused with the Spirit of God, was able to transform a dusty, cluttered, unattended room into a beautiful and welcoming space of rest and renewal for women. What we did was not complete without the participation of the CORMA staff and guests. When I asked the work team what was the most significant moment of our time together, we all agreed that it was when the CORMA staff came and left their handprints on the wall as part of the "Trees of Resiliency" mural. Not only do they daily have a hand in transforming the lives of the "least of these", they left their handprints on our hearts.



Though sometimes we hear dishonest descriptions of the long-term impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico by those who want to boost their own ego, what we saw with our own eyes, heard with our own ears, and what our hands have touched tell a different story. A story of flourishing, in spite of lack of access to resources. A story of trusting in God's unfailing love through the dark nights without electricity or communication. A story of praise for all of the ways God worked through people and communities to care for and provide for all of their needs. A story of hope and healing, not superficial sappiness that denies the damage, but of robust resiliency that rebuilds and repairs lives that grow stronger through the struggle. I give thanks to God and to all of you for the privilege of walking alongside of my faithful family in Puerto Rico and throughout the world. May we stay rooted in grace, connected in Christ, growing in faith while praising the

One who calls us beloved.

Peace and grace,

Mylinda

***But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever.
For what you have done I will always praise***



you

*in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good.*

Psalm 52:8-9, NIV