

That they may be one

John 17:1-11

May 28, 2017

Burma, Nicaragua, Liberia, Korea, and now Haiti. Why should we talk about Haiti? Because the people of Haiti need us? Yes. But that is only half of the story. We should talk about the people of Haiti because we need them.

Our group of travelers arrived in Port-au-Prince on a Friday night. The next morning, after an introductory conversation with the American director of a local children's hospital, we set out on a "tour" of the city and of the work stations to which we would be assigned for the week. Here is some of what I wrote later that day in my journal ...

... we venture through streets, narrow streets filled with people and vendors and rubble and stench. So much strikes the senses all at once. I feel ... as if part of me is awakened for the first time.

Then in Sans Fils, the home for the destitute and dying ... Shocking vision of humanity in AIDS ward. Literally skin and bones, so frail and weak ...

Then down more incredible streets ... The images, sights/sounds/smells begin to be overwhelming. Part of me wants to escape, to be away where it is quiet, serene, beautiful. There are so many people, it is all so chaotic, never at rest, never at ease.

As we walk the street we pass piles of rubble and cardboard, an open sewer lies below at the side. A huge pig wallows and forages in it. We cross the road and walk through the market toward wound clinic. We become separated. I don't really feel fearful per se, but I feel overwhelmed, unfamiliar. I repeat in my mind my prayer of this morning, "What is unfamiliar to me is so familiar to you, Lord. Show me your home."

I am overwhelmed by the sheer number of people, the amount of "stuff," the garbage, the mass, the commotion. My heart is heavy with hurt, with hurt for the poverty and the want and the ugliness ...

The burden, the feelings of heaviness are great ... This is a world I have not known, a world I have not included, a world that has not occupied space in my consciousness ...

Eight days later, on a Sunday morning, the day of our leaving, I took another walk, by myself ...

A long walk to the end of Delmar 19 and back ... one last opportunity to be among, not at a distance.

I appreciate walking a street where I am the only white person. It is an important corrective to my usual experience. A black person is not a unique phenomenon [here], but one of a variegated and complex and rich

race of persons ... like each one of us. Here I am the unique phenomenon, subject to stereotyping.

Being in Haiti for me was about seeing things with new eyes, seeing a world I never knew before, and seeing myself and my place in this world from an entirely different perspective. "Trip of Perspective" -- that's what it's called now. The sponsoring organization, the *Faith and Money Network* still takes people to Haiti. When I went twenty-six years ago, this ministry, birthed out of the Church of the Savior in Washington DC, was known as the *Ministry of Money* and my trip was called a "Pilgrimage of Reverse Mission," reverse mission, because we went not so much to give something to the people, but to get something from them.

Is that selfish? Rude? Arrogant? But when one gives and another receives, who is the powerful one? What impressed me in Haiti was not merely the great poverty of the people, but their great wealth, a depth of spirit and faith and hope I lacked. I left Haiti changed forever. My mind was changed. My heart was changed. My world was changed.

I knew what I would see when I went to Haiti because I had listened to the reports of the people from our church who had gone there before me. But I didn't know what I would see! I knew poverty as an idea, a statistic, but I didn't really know it.

And I did not appreciate the fact that most of the people of the world live like the people of Haiti, not like me, not like us. Eighty percent of the world's people, four of every five people, live like the men and women of Haiti live, and only twenty percent, one in five, live as we do. We are the exception, not the rule. I had always thought of my own life as the norm, and the life of folks in extreme poverty as the exception. But that is not the world we live in.

And if our faith is going to be an honest faith, it has to fit in the real world. It has to work in the real world. It has to make sense of the real world. It has to connect us to this world as it really is.

What is the cost of ignorance, willful or otherwise? What is the cost of ignoring the world as it is, of living in a bubble, of failing to understand that most of the folks with whom I share this globe are literally living one day at a time, their success just making it from one day to the next?

What is the cost? The cost is devastating loss. For whom? For them and for me.

What is the cost? The cost is inexcusable betrayal. Of whom? Of my brothers and my sisters and of our father.

Roger Desir helped me understand that. "We are all one race," he said. We must be together part of the solution, precisely because we are together the problem. It's not their burden, their problem, their suffering, but ours, ours together, and no one will be saved until all are saved.

I wrote in my journal ...

God is here because God has to be here. In Haiti, without God there is despair. God is hope and hope is God.

Sometimes [at home] it seems God is a luxury. People do just fine without God. There is no urgency, no pressing need, no deep longing.

Of course, that isn't true ... but it is especially untrue when we stop isolating ourselves from the rest of the world, when we recognize that their problem is our problem, that their urgency is our urgency ... when we stop thinking in terms of them and us.

This is one of the lessons that has most impressed me this week. It is not so much caring for the needy, being compassionate, identifying with suffering ... It is a matter of recognizing the bond, seeing a brother, a sister, sensing/understanding/believing/living our common humanity.

My mind was changed and my heart was changed. My heart was changed by the people of Haiti: by Roger Desir's deep wisdom and all-encompassing vision ... by the gracious welcome and generous gifts, tangible and intangible, proffered us by the people of the church of St. Martin du Tours in Port-au-Prince with whom we worshipped ... by the delight of the chambermaid with whom I shared a basket of limes ... by the joy and humanity of the men whom I served in the AIDS/TB ward at Sans Fils ... by Emmanuel, a young man in a wheelchair, disabled mentally and physically, but beaming and joyful and demonstrative, loving to touch and to be touched.

The people of Haiti may have less than us, but they most certainly are no less than us. That is the travesty of reducing a Haitian or any person, to an object of pity, a target for charity. In his book, "Eyes of the Heart," Jean Bertrand Aristide, former president of Haiti, corrects that misperception:

The poor ... face death and death every day. They survive. In Haiti we have survived for hundreds of years this way. This may be a jarring notion for those who believe that the poor are poor because they are stupid. If one believes this, one will always feel that the solution to poverty will not come from those who are poor. But in fact, if we are alive at all it is not because of aid or help from other countries, rather despite it. We are alive because of our tremendous capacity for survival.

The average Haitian survives on less than 250 U.S. dollars a year. This requires imagination every day ... In Cite Soleil, Port-au-Prince's largest slum, 400,000 people live in 2.5 square miles, in perhaps the worst living conditions in the Western Hemisphere. When you go there you have the impression that the people never sleep; there is activity day and night. This is because there is not enough physical space for everyone to lie down at the same time. They sleep in turns. What sustains these people?

How do these people survive? Why is suicide practically unheard of in Haiti? To understand we must move beyond statistics. To see the richness of the Haitian people we must examine cultural factors: wealth of humor, warmth of character, ease of laughter, dignity, solidarity. We have traditions in Haiti that allow us to share food when we can. We raise the child of a friend or relative who cannot. We work together ... to bring in a crop, or build a neighbor's house in exchange for a meal shared at the end of the day. We can make one more place on a tap-tap that is already impossibly full. The majority of Haitians survive in a vast informal economy that remains beyond the statisticians, yet provides sustenance for 70% of the urban workforce. And then we smile, and we still laugh ... There is a wealth of spirit here ...

A wealth of spirit. That's what the people of Haiti have to offer us. That's what we need from them. And that's why we can't save Haiti. You could give Haiti \$10 billion today, Roger Desir says, and it wouldn't be saved, because the problems are not merely economic, but spiritual and relational, and the problems are not Haiti's alone. We are sick, too. We are poor, too. All the earth and its peoples need to be healed, and we can only begin to be healed when we recognize that we are members of one family.

"Humanity has lost its vocation." That was Roger Desir's most memorable phrase: "Humanity has lost its vocation." We have lost our way, forgotten what we are about, occupied ourselves with vain pursuits, neglected our calling, neglected each other, neglected the purpose for which we were made, the purpose for which Jesus gave himself: that we be one.

When we worshipped that morning at St. Martin du Tours, I was invited to address the congregation, and this is a portion of what I said to them:

Nous croyons en le même sauveur, Jesus Christ. Nous sommes ensemble une partie de la même grande église de Jesus Christ. Et nous prenons part à la même espérance pour le futur, pour le futur de Haïti, pour le futur des États-Unis, et certainement pour le futur de tout le monde. Notre Père est plein de la grâce et de la puissance. Ainsi, nous regardons le futur avec joie.

"We believe in the same savior, Jesus Christ. We are together a part of the same great church of Jesus Christ. And we share the same hope for the future, for the future of Haiti, for the future of the United States, and certainly for the future of all the world. Our Father is full of grace and power. And so, we look to the future with joy."