

Sunday: January 24, 2010

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-6:1

## The Challenges and the Lessons of Haiti: Response to the Earthquake

I feel compelled this morning to speak to the horrendous events of the past two weeks in Haiti. I have become more and more convinced that God is in the process of doing something great and wonderful among the people of that island nation. All week long I have watched the reports coming out of that country of men, women and children being dug out of rubble alive; some after 5,6,7,8 days of being buried. From what we know about human survival, these rescues can be nothing less than miracles.

Then, of course, we have watched with frustration as food and medical supplies have piled up on the tarmac at the airport, with no organized system to distribute them to the folks who needed them. And we have watched as Doctors and Nurses have explained how they have had to amputate arms and legs to save the life of a child or parent, using nothing more than a hack saw from a carpenter's workbench.

We rejoiced as newly adoptive parents from the US arrived to pick up their daughter. They started the adoption five years ago, but every time they came to the orphanage to pick up their daughter, they were stymied. At last, they have flown home with her in their arms. And the other side of the coin is the picture of front end loaders dumping hundreds of bodies into trucks so that they can be taken to mass graves outside Port-o-Prince.

And the question that rings in my ears is: "Where is God in all of this?"

Now, some folks have suggested that God caused this earthquake to punish a pagan and sinful people.

That Haiti was akin to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that God brought down this horrible earth quake as a means of punishing a sinful and godless generation. At least one major Christian Leader has thus said on national television. A second TV commentator has even suggested that the American people refuse to give aid and assistance to the Haitian people. After all, he said on national TV, they already get much more that they deserve now from Federal assistance and aid. Do not give to the Red Cross, Do not help the Salvation Army meet this great need, do not send any money to help these people, he told the American public. The Haitians do not deserve it. Besides, they have squandered every thing we have already sent.

Isn't anyone here this morning bothered by this perverted mindset? This is a mindset that establishes itself as the prophetic voice of God, bringing God's judgment down and declaring the mind of God in the face of natural disaster. This is the mindset that would establish itself as the "judge" over people who have suffered a devastating blow from natural events. God help us! God forgive us!

Now, with all due respect to Scripture, there are numerous examples of God's creation erupting in the life of the Hebrew People. Earthquake, wind and fire, drought and floods have occurred since the beginning of time. And the only way that the primitive people of God had to understand these things was to explain them as God's hand at work. Thus, when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, the only explanation was a Theological one. God did it! And why did God do it? Because these people demonstrated a lifestyle that was antithetical to the way of Yahweh. But what is more important, the Hebrew Understanding of such events was predicated upon their understanding of a righteous and vengeful God. "You cross God, and God will get you." It was the only way they had to understand the events of nature. They did not understand that the earth's land masses were situated on tectonic plates that were moving and that from time to time this movement came as an earthquake. They did not understand that there were certain places where the earth's crust was so thin that from time to time the molten lava at the core of the earth would force its way to the surface causing mountains to rise and lava and ash to spew down upon people. They did not understand that from the beginning of time God's creative power placed the earth spinning in the universe and set the process that bulged up the mountains and carved out the canyons and valleys. They did not have an understanding of God's earthly order, so the only way they could explain what happened was to envision a God who would use wind, fire, earthquake, floods and drought as weapons in God's war against unrighteousness.

But something absolutely wonderful happened to God's People. Jesus Christ came down from heaven and dwelt among us. God's Son became human, and he spent his life bringing a new understanding to the relationship between God and Man. And because of His life, death and resurrection, we have become a new kind of people. Because of Jesus Christ we are no longer restricted and constricted by the old understandings, which were, at best, feeble attempts to understand God and how God interacted with us. I want to point you to two passages. The first is our passage from Luke.

Jesus returns to his hometown. He left a carpenter. He returned a new person, the Son of God, The Messiah. He enters the synagogue and reads from the book of Isaiah. Look at what he read:

***The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
Because he has anointed me  
To preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
And recovery of sight for the blind  
To release the oppressed,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.***

Who are the people for whom the Messiah is coming into the world? The Poor, the Prisoners, the Blind and the Oppressed. Every one of those categories has a double meaning.

Who are the Poor? Folks who don't earn enough to support themselves within any given economy?

We are told that, before the earthquake, the average family in Haiti had to exist on about \$1.00 a day. Yes, that is poor! But the poor might also be those who have all the riches of this world and have no meaning in their lives. They are poor in their understanding of what life is all about, so they gather their things about them and then spend the rest of their lives protecting their things, their positions, their place in society. Did you read the story in last Sunday's PARADE about the Salwen family in Atlanta. After struggling to establish themselves as a family, they were finally able to afford that dream home in an upscale suburb of Atlanta. They drew apart. They had what they had dreamed of, and instead of bringing them happiness they felt estranged. One day their 14 year old daughter became upset about the disparities between the world's haves and have-nots. She challenged her family to make a difference. As a family they decided that they did not need such a big home. So they decided to scale back, sell the high dollar home and give it to an organization that was making a difference. They had to get used to a little less space. They choose The Hunger Project to assist with their funds. Then they decided to go see the villages where their funds were at work. Listen to Kevin's final words: " Like us, your family could set out to make a small difference in the world – and transform yourselves in the process." I BELIEVE THAT JESUS KNEW THAT "POOR" HAD VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH FINANCES AND WEALTH. Jesus had some good news for people who were poor in spirit.

And Jesus came to proclaim freedom to the prisoners. I spent five years teaching classes in the North Carolina prison system. I can tell you unequivocally that there is nothing those men would like to experience more than freedom. And while we do not have any stories of Jesus going into the prisons and setting people free, we do have numerous stories of Jesus setting people free whose minds and hearts were locked behind the prison doors of ignorance and misunderstanding. That's what the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about. That's what Nicodemus discovered when he climbed up in that tree to see Jesus. That's what the woman at the well discovered when Jesus asked her to draw up some water for him to drink. I believe that Jesus was sent to earth by God to shake the bars of the prisons that keep us locked up in heart, body and soul. Sometimes the very ideas and traditions by which we live can become the prisons which keep us bound and fettered.

In his book **BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME**, Timothy B. Tyson, tells of a time in the early 1960's when his father was the pastor of the Jonesboro Heights Methodist Church in Sanford, NC. The issue of racial separation was like a lightning rod in most southern communities. The Rev. Vernon Tyson invited Dr. Samuel Proctor to preach at his church on February 2, 1964, Race Relations Sunday. Timothy Tyson was a young boy at the time, but he remembers the hate phone calls that came pouring in. He remembers the threats to bomb his home and the night that the Board at the Methodist Church met to have his father rescind his invitation to Dr. Proctor, who at that time was President of North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro. Let me read the passage for you.

At six o'clock the night before Dr. Proctor was scheduled to preach, Daddy called an emergency meeting of the church's administrative board in an effort to ease the controversy. It may have been a tactical error. Some of the board members angrily demanded that my father cancel Dr. Proctor's appearance the next morning. One of his adversaries kept pushing the telephone on the desk toward him, saying, "You can end all this with one phone call." Others began to ask Daddy why he thought his one service was really worth the painful breach that loomed in front of them. "This thing is going to tear this church apart," one man insisted. Just as the meeting threatened to dissolve in an uproar, a quiet, dignified older woman rose to speak. Miss Amy Womble was sixty, an "old-maid schoolteacher," her neighbors would have said in those days. She walked with a limp. Miss Womble had been a first-grade teacher to most of the people in that room. The community honored her, but nobody had any idea what she thought about the burning social issues of the day. "I've been just sitting here sort of listening," Miss Amy said. "And I hear one of us saying this is going to tear this church apart." She looked directly at the man who had said it. "Now I don't know the man who is coming very much. I know he is the president of A&T, that's all I know. But I know our pastor, and you know him, too, and he's not going to tear anything apart. And I don't suppose Dr. Proctor is going to tear anything apart, either. If there is going to be any tearing done, we're going to do the tearing apart ourselves."

Miss Amy slowly hobbled to the front of the room and told the silent group of her former students a story. "There was a case up near Chapel Hill recently," she said, "where a teenage boy went around a curve too fast and was killed in a car crash. So they thought. He was down there by the side of the road and they were just waiting for the ambulance to come and take him to the funeral home. There wasn't any signs of life.

But then an airman from Pope Air Force Base stopped. He was home on furlough, and he saw the boy lying down there and he scrambled down the embankment and opened the boy's mouth," she continued. "And he saw the boy's tongue stuck back in his throat, and he ran his finger back there and pulled out that tongue, and then gave that boy mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. By the time that ambulance got there," Miss Amy said, "that boy was walking around alive as you and me. And the next week they had a big dinner up at the fire station in Orange County for that airman, celebrating how he had saved that boy's life." She paused once more.

"What I haven't told you is that the boy who had the wreck was white, and that airman that saved him was a black man. But that's the truth," she said, "and I want all of you fathers to tell me something" She looked searchingly around the room. "Now, which one of you fathers would have said to that airman, 'Now, don't you run your black fingers down my boy's white throat?' Which of y'all would have told that airman, 'Don't you dare put your black lips on my boy's mouth'?"

My father, who retold the story in later years, including the day he preached Miss Amy Womble's funeral, said, "I have never heard the voice of the Lord with such thunder, such wisdom, such love." And something slightly miraculous occurred. THE BOARD VOTED 25 TO 14 TO STAND WITH VERNON AND WELCOME DR. PROCTOR.

When Daddy got home, my mother met him at the door with a bemused expression on her face.

"Grayson Bryan came by," She said. "and he was crying." Bryan was from South Carolina and had come to Sanford to work in the local textile mill and live with what my daddy generously called "his poor sainted mother," whom my father visited regularly. But Bryan had been one of my father's most ardent adversaries on the issue of race, and had angrily condemned Daddy for invited "That Nigger Preacher" to our church. My father did not even come into the house, just turned around and drove straight to Grayson Bryan's place. Mr. Bryan, his face still wet with tears, met Daddy at the door, welcomed him inside and poured him a glass of iced tea. "I want to tell you, Preacher, something happened to me tonight. When Miss Amy was talking, something happened that ain't ever happened before. Old Love just come up in my heart," Bryan sobbed, "and I want to tell you that I love you, I love Dr. Proctor, I love everybody. And then Mr. Bryan fell to his knees beside his chair, and Daddy knelt beside him and said a short prayer and went on home.

And the story goes on....

There was a time when folks believed that the Bible condoned slavery. There was a time when people lived in a prison forged by misconceptions based on fears and anxieties. This is still a time when lots of folks live in prisons that they have fashioned to protect some belief, some fear, some irrational fallacy that has been accepted as truth, when it is nothing more than human failure to understand. Yes,

can anyone deny that the prisoners that Jesus came to free are often we ourselves?

Who are the blind? People who had lost their eyesight. Jesus even healed a few of them during his short stay here on earth. But could it be that the Blind were really those all around him who knew about God and Faith, but were blinded by the religious establishment of their day. The scriptures are very clear that the most blind among them were the religious practitioners of that day, the scribes and the Pharisees. Those who believed that they had God all wrapped up and locked away in their religious systems of laws and retribution. Was it not Jesus who said: Woe to the scribes and Pharisees. And time after time Jesus pulled away the cataracts of their religious blindness, calling into question their prejudice against Samaritans and others who they claimed were unclean.

So then, who are oppressed? The Jews of Jesus' time believed they were the oppressed. For over 800 years they had fought against outside armies. From the armies of Nebuchadnezzar to the conquering forces of Rome, not a year went by when they were not under the thumb of some outside power. How the Hebrew Children longed for a Messiah who would lead them out of oppression.

But what did they get? A simple carpenter, a man of authority and power, who understood oppression in totally different terms. Not the oppression of outside forces, but the internal oppression of internal domination by an elitist religious nobility whose sole purpose it was to maintain the status quo. It is oppression to bring the finest lamb to the temple as a sacrifice, only to be told that your lamb will not do and you have to purchase one that has been approved by the Priest. It is oppression to make your gift to the temple coffers only to be told that it was not large enough to satisfy God. It is oppression of the highest order to have whole segments of society cast off and ignored simply because they are crippled, or have a disease, or suffer from fits, or have the wrong parents or have the wrong skin color or the wrong ethnic background. It is oppression of the highest order to have your

family lands and your inheritance confiscated by the courts simply because you are a widow and you have no husband, or brother, or adult son to protect you. There is no higher oppression than the oppression of widows and orphans.

And that is why I am so proud of the Church I serve, from Altavista Presbyterian to Presbytery of the Peaks, to the General Assembly, because in the name of Jesus Christ we are in the process of doing everything we can possibly do to help the Haitian people through this disaster. And when the time comes that a team of workers is needed to help over there, I expect to be among one of the teams. In the meantime, we will lift them up in our prayers and we will contribute out of our wealth to alleviate their suffering. And, if it were possible to bring ten Haitian families to Altavista to live while their homeland is being rebuilt, I believe we could rehab ten homes in this community in short order so that they would have a place to live. And their children could attend our schools, so that when they returned home they would have a new understanding of what life could be like.

How we respond to this tragedy in Haiti can become a perfect example of what Jesus Christ really means to this world in which we live. And it would be a fulfillment of the passage he read from Isaiah 2000 years ago in that synagogue in Galilee. Now, today, in this age, we The Church, the Body of Christ alive in the world becomes the living fulfillment of Isaiah's insight: We are come to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind and release to the oppressed. The Haitians in their troubles.... Moslems in their misguided hatred.... And blind commentators and religious pundits in our nation.

I am reminded that it was our Lord who instructed his disciples saying: God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

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