

Sermon on Haiti Experience
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Readings Given Prior to Sermon:

An excerpt from the poem *Sometimes* by Mary Oliver:

"Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

And, from the Buddhist poet and philosopher Mark Nepo:

How do we begin
to inhabit our destiny of being here?

...It starts...with honoring
every bit of life
we encounter.

...at the deepest level,
When I say *I honor you*,
This means that,
When I become conscious
Or aware of you,
I make a commitment
To keep that truth visible
From that moment forward.

To honor you means
That what I've learned about you
Becomes part
Of our shared geography.
It means that what has become
Visible and true
Will not become
Invisible again.

An Excerpt from "A Prayer"

by Rev. Barbara Ford

In times of limitless grief
We have but two choices:
Our hearts can break, OR . . .
They can break wide open.
The broken heart can fall,
 clutching and desperate,
 into a deep chasm of loneliness.
The heart broken open
Joins with the pain of a million other hearts
And knows Finally
That it is never alone.
May we choose the communion
 of broken hearts over isolation,
And with that choosing,
May we act together in love
Toward the healing
of the heart of the world.

Our Hearts, Broken Open

As people of faith,
we are called to witness
the human experience.
In the words of poet Mary Oliver,
We are encouraged to pay attention,
To be astonished by what we experience,
And to tell others about it.

For those familiar with
Mary Oliver's poetry,
It is easy to hear her words
As a call to witness
The healing beauty of nature.

Yet, I believe her instructions for life
call us to experience
More than beauty,
More than the wonders of nature.
We are called to witness
Human nature.
ALL of the human experience –
The good...
The bad....
As well as the agonizing,
sorrow-filled ugly suffering of life.

Barbara Ford's reading
Calls us to find the courage
To not only witness
What will break our hearts,
But also to witness
The stuff of life
That will truly
Break our hearts wide open.

For it is there,
In this place of deep, painful witness,
where the path
Towards greater truth and justice making
Begins for each of us.
It is in the breaking of our hearts
Where our faith
Calls us to action
to help heal this suffering
and sacred world.

I have just returned
From Haiti.
I participated in
a UU College of Social Justice trip,
Where we bore witness
to the work
Our denomination is doing
In the central plateaus
for victims of the devastating earthquake
Of January 2010.
Working under the guidance
Of a Haitian partner organization,
our UU Service Committee donations
are building farming villages
for some of the many refugees who
fled the collapse and ruins of Port au Prince
into the rural interior
to rebuild their lives
in the wake of unspeakable losses.

It is difficult, hard work,
As well as difficult HEART work, really –
To witness such widespread poverty,
such hardscrabble
Hand-to-mouth living.

The physical work is difficult, too --
To follow behind where oxen have plowed,
Lifting and clearing rocks and debris
To the side of the fields.
Using hand tools to help the villagers
create furrowed rows.
To stoop over and over
and plant seeds or seedlings
in the heat of the tropical mid-day sun.

There is plenty here
To break a heart.
As we cross over
Rivers and streams,
The long, sloping banks
Of both sides
are covered in piles of trash --
Human refuse and litter
cascade all the way down to the riverbeds.
I watch people, and large dark brown pigs,
wade through the shin deep trash together.
People and pigs,
Competing with one another
For possible scraps of something to eat –
Hidden among the garbage.

It is a painful witness,
Of such poverty and pollution.
And, yet, my broken heart also knows
That I am fooling myself,
If I think that a similar scene
Isn't playing out even now,
Somewhere, in our own country.
That people and pigs aren't rooting together
through some garbage pile,
looking for scraps of food
in the rural backyard
Of our own Land of Plenty.....

(PAUSE)

It is difficult to view Haiti
Without the filter of my familiar,
abundant Western lifestyle.
Looking through the lens of abundance,
I couldn't help but see scarcity
All around me –

For example, all the rural villages
Where we worked --
except one --
Had no electric power.
None had running water,
let alone flushing toilets.
And medical care
is unaffordable and scarce,
if almost non-existent,
in the rural plateau.

My heart was broken
By a relatively young man
We met in one village,
Whose coal-black eyes
Are now clouded over
By the milky blue of cataracts.
He is completely blind.
His wife shared with us,
Through translators,
How they struggle to feed themselves,
Now that he can no longer farm.

His condition
Is usually easy to treat
here in America –
His sight would most likely
be restored in a “day surgery” procedure.
How different this young man,
And his family’s, life might be
If only some medical mission trip
had reached far enough back
into this rural corner of Haiti.
I hold out hope
That a medical mission trip
Might reach him yet,
if it is not too late to save his sight.

The history of this suffering nation
Also breaks my heart.
I was surprised to learn
That Haiti won its independence
From Colonial France
Only about 30 years after
The American Revolution.
Borne from a slave uprising,
Haitians became the first
independent black republic.

And, yet, more than 200 years
have passed since 1804:
Where are the paved roads?
Where is electric power?
Where is the sewage treatment
And plumbing infrastructure
To safeguard human health
And supply safe drinking water?
Where are enough schools
To educate all
Of the nation's children?
And where are the medical clinics
And hospitals needed to save lives,
And to promote human health
And well-being?

After more than two centuries,
Haiti remains
One of the poorest of all
Of the impoverished nations
On the face of the earth.
How can that be?

Century after century of one brutal,
self-serving military dictatorship
after another has played its part –
cruel, murderous regimes
who were often
propped up by Western nations,
including our own --
Western superpowers
willing to turn a blind eye
To the corruption,
the human rights violations,
The ongoing violence,
And the never-ending
Cycle of poverty and starvation
of the Haitian people.

(PAUSE)

It is both sad
And maddening to see
How Western cultural hubris
Continues to play out
In Haiti today.
How often do Western nations
Assume to have all the answers –
To know best
What an impoverished,
developing nation needs.

Here's a good example we witnessed:
Our College of Social Justice group
Visited with
An agricultural tech worker
Who travels from village to village
Helping farmers share equipment
And solve planting and irrigation problems.

So, we asked the tech,
"If you could have one thing --
one particular tool
or technology --
that would make the biggest difference
in the life of these villagers,
what would that one thing be?"

He just shook his head and laughed.
"I'll tell you what I
DON'T need," he said.
"Please, stop sending me
your expensive, computerized tractors.
First of all,
I can't afford the gasoline
To fill them up and run them.
And, when the tractors break down,
I don't have any parts here
And can't make parts from scratch that will fix them.
What we need are OXEN,
not tractors.
Please, please, send me more OXEN."

And there we were,
Laughing together at the absurd humor
Found in an example
Of the best of helping intentions
Not quite working out
As planned.
It is in moments like these
where we can find our hearts
Broken wide open
by this all-too-human experience.

I recognize myself
In this story:
Of my own bumbling
Well-intentioned attempts
To be of help
In a Haitian farm field,
When, in truth,
I ended up doing more harm than good.

Here's how:
I fell on a hike back home
earlier this year
And broke my right leg
Right above the ankle.
I didn't require surgery,
But had to wear
A stabilizing boot for several months
While the bones healed.

My physical therapy rehab
And walking exercises
Took place on even surfaces.
So when I walked out into
the dirt clods, stones
and uneven furrowed rows
of a Haitian farm field,
my right ankle
didn't know how to
adjust and balance itself.
I lurched around out there like Frankenstein,
trying to catch my balance
from one stumble to the next.

As I tried desperately
Not to fall,
I managed to stomp down
on a brand new seedling
that had just been planted.

Oh good grief!
I was horrified.
Despite my best intentions,
The most helpful thing I could do now
For these villagers
Was to get myself out of the field
And onto the sidelines
Before I crushed
Any more of their crops.

In truth, our whole group
Suspected that no matter how hard
We worked the fields,
We were most likely in the way
Of our village hosts.
They moved so much more quickly
And got so much more done
With their handheld tools.

After a hot, dusty morning
working side by side in the fields,
We took a break with the villagers
In the cool shade of the village meeting hut.
We asked questions about
Their farming, and about their lives.

We asked:

“What is the one thing you hope
we remember about this day?
What do you want us to share
About your lives with others
when we get back home?”

Through translators,
several villagers answered:
“We are glad you are here.
Not many foreigners are willing
to work with us in the hot sun –
You now know
some of the truth about our lives.
You now know that
Our lives here are very hard.
And, when you tell people
About how difficult it is here,
Let them also know
we are making progress.
We are not discouraged.”

“We are not discouraged.”
These villagers
help me see the hope
That can lie even at the very edge of starvation.
And my heart is humbled,
And broken open.

I have great faith that
the people of this village
Will not only survive, but,
One day, will also thrive,
because they embody
the best of what beloved community
has to offer all human beings,
everywhere.
No matter what challenges
Are ahead –
And, in Haiti, I suspect there will be many --
This group of villagers will face them
And share the burden, together.
They make sure all are first fed,
And they have already pooled
extra fruits and vegetables
To sell at market.

Together, they are saving money,
One dollar at a time.
Someday, they hope to save enough
to buy a motor scooter and a cart,
So the village will have transportation,
And a faster way
to get their produce to market.

Four years ago, these individuals were refugees
From the earthquake.
They were strangers to one another.
Many had lost everything,
Including beloved family members.
Now, they are starting over, together.
They live in tight community,
They have each other's backs,
And they work together
for the greater good of all.

(PAUSE)

Our social witness work in Haiti
Begins to transform us.
Many in our group
Feel that our work here
Has changed
how they see their own lives, forever.
We can't help but be reminded
Of the unspeakable bounty
We take for granted,
As we walk among people with no shoes.

Some of the group expressed guilt
And shame over having so much
While so many here,
And around the world, have so little.
We sit together,
Acknowledging and holding
Our shared sorrow
as we recognize
the tremendous disparity
Between our lives
And the lives of those
Who face extreme poverty
Every day.

One woman spoke up
Into our circle:
“I never really thought of myself
as being rich before now --
Of thinking of myself as
Being privileged.
But I am.
Look at my life!
I have virtually everything
I really, truly need.
And yet, I’ve certainly
Found plenty of time
To complain about my life
To anyone who would listen.
I’m never going to do that again.
Ever.”

We risk falling down
a rabbit hole of despair,
As we recognize that the problems of Haiti
Are long-standing and complex.
That the problems of systemic racism,
Corruption and bone-crunching poverty
are more than any one of us
can solve on our own,
And will most likely take several lifetimes
Of many people working together
To begin to heal.

But the words of the villagers
Keep pulling us back
from the brink of despair –
“Things are getting better.
We are not discouraged.”

The villagers remind us that
The act of witnessing
Can also bring powerful, transforming validation
To those we stop to really see, as well.
“Pay attention. Be astonished.
Tell about it,” the poet says.
“You now know some of the truth
about our lives,” the villagers say.
They trust we will tell their story—
Will share the truth about what we have seen
In the hopes that our story-telling
Will bring eventual change
To the central highlands of Haiti.
And they remind us to include
Their hope as part of our witness.

Our reading from Mark Nepo
Speaks of the promise of social witness,
and of the transformation
and hope it can bring:

When I become conscious
Or aware of you,
Nepo writes,
I make a commitment
To keep that truth visible
From that moment forward.
... what I've learned about you
Becomes part
Of our shared geography.
It means that what has become
Visible and true
Will not become
Invisible again.

So how do we keep
The pain and hope
Of our powerful social witness in Haiti
Up front and visible as we return
To our day to day lives?

We encourage our hearts
To remain broken open by our experience,
to share our stories and our photos
of the courageous people we met,
and of the life they lead.
We encourage others
to participate in future,
Life-changing
College of Social Justice trips.

Perhaps some of us might return to Haiti,
To continue the work
of building farm communities
That are literally saving people's lives,
One village at a time.

We are called to build upon
Our newfound awareness
Of the privilege we enjoy,
And the access to power
Our many resources can bring.
Some of us might be called
to work with elected officials
in the long-term hopes of shifting
foreign aid policies.
To stop the U.S. from supporting
inept, corrupt, oppressive
third world governments
that benefit an elite few
in favor of nation-building policies
that truly supports the long-term
health, development and well-being
of all peoples.

And, we can choose
to honor our hearts --
our hearts broken open
By all we have witnessed --
To put our faith into action,
Starting in the backyards
of our own communities.
In this congregation,
We invite you to get involved with VOICE,
A multi-faith organization
Working for fair housing
Right here in Arlington County.
Or, you might choose to
Work with our immigration justice team,
To help stop local deportations
that are tearing young families apart.

As our final reading this morning
Reminds us:
We are called to choose the communion
Of broken hearts over isolation,
And with that choosing,
We act together, in love,
Toward the healing
Of the heart of the world.
Amen.
May our witnessing
And our faith make it so.