

Release to the Captives

Last Sunday, when we joined thousands of churches across this country in taking a special collection for the people of Haiti, survivors of the quake gathered to sing, pray and worship God, in some cases near the ruins of their church buildings. The image behind me, of a woman praying outside what is left of Our Lady of Ascension National Cathedral is a vivid and perhaps even haunting example of the transcendent power of faith. Outside that building daily, some people are giving thanks for still having their lives, others are repenting and asking for forgiveness for their sins, and others are lifting up prayers of petition, that they be delivered with their loved ones from this disaster.

Fred Grimm, a reporter for The Miami Herald, described Sunday morning at Our Lady of Ascension with complete bafflement and just a hint of hostility. He writes in the Monday Herald, "They sang. They prayed. They held their hands aloft and swayed. Behind them, the soaring pink and cream wall of the great old church, Our Lady of Ascension, rose to a jagged and perilous height without the supporting beams of a roof, which had come tumbling down with the earthquake five days before. The 81-year-old building, among the nation's most recognized landmarks, looked battered beyond repair. Yet worshipers gathered in the shadow of the broken shell and suggested they were in need of forgiveness. Someone among the believers had risked the jagged piles of concrete and the twisted steel jutting from the rubble to place four bouquets at the base of the white cross on the southern quadrant of the church grounds. A woman struggling across our language gap tried to explain that the undamaged cross rising out of such wreckage was itself a kind of miracle. The mysteries of faith never seemed so confounding as on this Sunday morning in the luckless, ruined yet ever-pious town of Port-au-Prince."

Now, I don't pretend to understand the mysteries of faith, and I too struggle with the logic of a battered, oppressed people giving thanks to the very God whose creation just killed thousands and tore many of them apart from their loved ones. They've lost their homes and even the sanctuaries they built to honor God, and even when all that is rubble they still sing praises. But I firmly believe that God has a special presence with people in such dire circumstances, a presence that I cannot begin to understand in my current position of safety and privilege. That cross, piercing the sky undamaged among the rubble is indeed a kind of miracle – the symbol of Christ's suffering, the reminder that God shares our lot and knows our pain – stands tall amid the suffering and devastation of the people of Haiti. The Greek word for miracle is "sign" and miracles are not merely things that defy physics or medicine, but rather markers of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. I have no doubt an engineer can explain how a roof can cave in and leave the cross unscathed, but that does not make it any less powerful of a sign of God's presence in Haiti. Christ knows pain and suffering, betrayal and crucifixion, murdered by the very people he delivers. Christians strive to understand the power of the cross, that heartache and evil is not removed from existence by God but rather defeated by love, sacrifice and resurrection.

In times of great natural disasters we often search for a "theodicy" or theological explanation and context for the disaster. Some Haitians believe they are

being punished as a people for their sins. We even heard an outlandish and ignorant theodicy from the infamous Pat Robertson. Jim Wallis, a prominent activist and editor of Sojourner's magazine, provides a contrasting theodicy. He writes, "Pat Robertson said that Haiti's earthquake was caused because of the country's 'pact with the devil.' I don't even know what he means, nor do I care. But I want to say this: My God does not cause evil. God is not a vengeful and retributive being, waiting to strike us down; instead, God is in the very midst of this tragedy, suffering with those who are suffering. When evil strikes, it's easy to ask, where is God? The answer is simple: God is suffering with those who are suffering."

Wallis's theodicy does have the sign of the cross at Our Lady of Ascension and the faith of those worshipping near it on his side. And while I don't think Wallis's answer is as simple as he suggests, I do believe that God is walking alongside the people of Haiti and can be found amidst the destruction and brutality. And Jesus, the suffering Messiah, his face is always visible in those who are homeless or hungry, be in here in Murrieta or among the rubble in Port-au-Prince. Not only does Jesus know the trials and tribulations of the human condition, but Jesus has a special message and ministry to the poor and oppressed.

In today's scripture Jesus repeats the prophet Isaiah, and imposes its words upon himself. Jesus says, "The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." To put the scripture in context, Jesus reads this near the beginning of his ministry, shortly after spending time in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. He reads this passage in his home town of Nazareth, and reveals himself as a prophet to his hometown. I'll spoil the ending by telling you that Jesus goes on to antagonize the synagogue to the point where they decide to throw him off a cliff. But this is Jesus, so he escapes like a ninja, no problem, just passes through the crowd.

Many scholars, myself included, see the choice of scripture Jesus uses at Nazareth as incredibly significant. Not only is Jesus locating himself in the prophetic tradition of Judaism – one where prophets are transient and not welcome in their home town – but he is also setting the tone for his ministry. Both Christ and Messiah are words that mean "anointed one" and Jesus is telling us he is anointed to proclaim release to the captives. Some of us think that this passage functions a bit like Jesus' mission statement – and Jesus' message is one that is good news to the poor.

Liberation theology began as a Catholic theological movement of the sixties in Latin America was responding to the crisis of poverty and violence widespread across the continent, and continues to have a strong influence on contemporary theology. In short, Liberation Theology is theology done from the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized and with the explicit purpose of advocating for the economically poor. In fact, some Liberation Theologians use liberation of the poor as the organizing principle of their theology, that is they view every event and doctrine, whether it's the second coming, the resurrection or sin, through the lens of liberation. This particular passage is one that liberation theologians often use to ground themselves biblically. They would say Jesus positions himself as a champion

of the oppressed and marginalized, and there is definitely an abundance of supporting scriptures, especially in Luke's Gospel. Luke is often called the social justice gospel, and is the most class conscious. Interestingly, the Gospel of Luke begins with a dedication to Theophilus, a wealthy Roman man, but of all the gospels has the largest role for women and the harshest words to the rich. We are in Year C of the lectionary, which features heavily the Gospel of Luke, and while I don't always follow the lectionary as a preacher, we will certainly be hearing more from this justice-oriented Gospel in the future.

Liberation theology has its strengths in being Biblically grounded, pragmatic, grass-roots oriented and having a sense of mission and urgency. Its intense focus on the economically poor and politically oppressed makes it one-sided, but most Liberation Theologians would say that's the whole point. This is theology for the oppressed, not oppressors. However, I think to reach its full potential liberation theology needs to also address the perils of material excess and how the crisis of poverty and the crisis of materialism are related.

Last week I preached on the thorns of conformity, referencing the parable of the sower and the seed that had fallen among the thorns. It began to grow, but was consumed by the comforts and anxieties of worldly possessions before it could bear fruit. Here in American society, where the Christian message is heard frequently but is also frequently treated itself as a consumer good, I think the perils of materialism is our biggest challenge. All of us are part of this material culture, so I think few of us come away unscathed by the thorns of the world. And often accompanying materialism is a deep sense of aimlessness and alienation. One reason *The Purpose-Driven Life* was so popular here in Southern California, and has sold over 20 million copies, is that in a materialistic culture it taps into a deep need people were having – a sense of purpose to their lives.

One concept that is developed beautifully in Liberation Theology is that of structural sin. Sin has traditionally been seen as personal and individual transgressions against God, structural sin acknowledges that the brokenness and imperfection of humanity occupies not only our day to day actions, but the social institutions we create – like our governments and our churches. For the economically oppressed, structural sin is often found in exploitative labor agreements, corrupt governments and failing social services. But I think even those who are not economically oppressed are the victims of structural sin. The collective competitiveness and consumerism of society is another symptom of structural sin, one that keeps people spiritually captive, and imprisoned in a cell that keeps them from coming into full community with their neighbors.

The model of Christ is one that frees us from the captivity of structural sin and allows us to love and serve our neighbor in spiritual freedom. Structural sin, whether it is the forces of poverty or material excess, has a tendency to estrange us from others in our community, whether its on a local level where the poor and the rich rarely interact even when on the same city block, or globally when there's an ocean between us. One way I've seen structural sin overcome in the life of this particular church is in the stories I hear about UCV's partnership with the town of Chacraseca in Nicaragua. I was born during the Reagan administration, which was a

time when US tax dollars were going to fund counter-revolutionaries in Nicaragua, often against both international and US law, and the hostilities between our countries ran deep. Guerrilla warfare made the country unsafe for any person, and the danger was exponential for Americans.

To hear, then, testimony from many of you about a rich cultural exchange, of how serving our neighbors in Chacraseca has transformed the faith of many of you, is truly inspirational. I think this partnership is a microcosm of how the crisis of poverty and the crisis of materialism can meet each other. I know from my own work with the homeless how it provided me with perspective, but also gave me a sense of connection to something transcendent and larger than myself. Some of the best advice I've gotten in life so far has come from conversations in that shelter. While at the shelter, I have also seen men in desperate situations transition into a fuller life because of the support and compassion of strangers. The stories I have heard from Nicaragua are similar, stories where both parties emerge enriched by the spirit of the other.

Now I don't think international partnerships like the one we have with Chacraseca will make the mysteries of faith any more comprehensible. It's not going to help us understand why there is evil in the world, or why terrible things happen to innocent people. But I do think they help us connect us to the Kingdom of Heaven, in the sense that they remind us we are part of something much greater than ourselves, something that transcends our immediate situation. We can be part of the body of Christ on earth, the very Christ that preaches good news to the poor and proclaims release to the captives, the very Christ that lets the oppressed go free.

Jesus was not the Messiah or liberator the Jews expected – he didn't restore a descendent of David to the throne nor did he vanquish the Romans. Instead of brandishing a sword, Jesus bore a cross. But by bearing a cross Jesus gives us an example of how to persevere in the face of evil, and where true and transcendent victory is found. Liberation is in loving your neighbor, blessing your enemy and living into the Kingdom of Heaven instead of the Kingdoms of this world. Your life may be taken, the walls may cave in around you, but your spirit is eternal and endures. The Reign of God – the Reign of Love – is not one where the “right” forces are in power, nor is it an absence of pain and suffering, but rather one where love perseveres in the face of tribulation, one where new life and resurrection springs forth from death and devastation. The cross standing among the rubble, then, is not the aftermath of a disaster but a sign of the love that can endure any hardship.

AMEN.