

St. Timothy's, Herdon
August 28, 2022
Trinity 12
homily by roger bowen

Disturb us Lord, when we are too well-pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore. Disturb us lord when the abundance of the things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the water of life. Stir us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery, where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars, We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes and to push us into the future in strength and courage and hope and love. We pray in the name of our Captain. Amen. 1.

*But when you give a banquet, invite the **poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.** 2.*

Could we ask for a more spot-on appropriate Gospel selection for today? I don't think so.

I'm grateful to you all and to Father Charles for our time together. I know that I am preaching to the converted this morning ... your precious, ongoing ministry to children in Haiti is an inspiration. So, I want to speak with you about Haiti and about Jesus' instructions to that Pharisee. Because you, and your Haitian brothers and sisters – together - you have invited some special people – 300 children coming this year - to your banquet table, your school ... just like the Gospel story today... you have invited the poorest of the poor. And, we know that almost half the kids in Haiti can't even **go** to a school.

I just learned that your parish is heading to Shrine Mont in a couple weeks for your annual retreat. I remember a special Shrine Mont moment. We all have SM moments. It was years ago, while I served as chaplain... back even before Father Charles was a St. George's counselor up there. A young camper amazed me with his insight. It happened as we sat in those rockers on the rectory porch during worship preparation. This little guy had brought along some colorful yarn and he took two sticks and wound the yarn round and round, wove it around the two sticks, all together, expanding the color pattern outwards. A cross in the middle. You've seen this, right? He called it a "God's Eye," of course. And then he said, "Hey, this is like us, like we're all connected together, different colors, all one." And after worship in the Shrine, he hung the God's Eye in his cabin. Then he said this. He said, "I wish we didn't spend so much time thinking about how we are not like each other. We're connected... like this!" A fifth grader! Out of the mouths of babes! Six or so years later that same boy wound up joining a St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School's Haiti partnership trip.

I know Father Charles invited me here this morning to encourage you and thank you for the love you have shared with the children in the lakeside village of Chapoteau, in Haiti's Plateau Central. It's been a growing outreach for ya'll for what? ten years now. And I know that together with St. Matthew's Church over in Sterling, you are working long distance these days,

working through your partner-Haitian Episcopal priest, Pere Kesner Gracia. I have visited with him. He lives in a hospital and schools complex in a place called Cange ... made famous by Dr. Paul Farmer's work. Dr. Farmer and Pere Fritz Lafontant built the original, now-famous hospital there ... and your school, Lekol St. Matthiu, is one of several, distant missions/schools that Pere Gracia serves **in** his "parish." A parish in Haiti is like a solar system – it includes a main church where the priest usually resides, and then as many as a dozen satellite missions and preaching stations some distance away. They are all that priest's responsibility; That's a lot to cover, and so, lay leadership is critical.

I know your visits have shown you that the majority of Pere Gracia's people lack the basic things we take for granted as essential to maintaining a good standard of living. In a country where nearly half of the people are still unable to read, literacy is a step toward self-determination. So, schools. **Children** ... are THAT diocese's focus. Every Episcopal church is also a school.

You probably also know that Haiti may be the largest diocese in the Episcopal Church – in fact in terms of numbers it is **the** largest. 80,000 communicants ... Virginia's close. Materially-impooverished but spiritually rich and vibrant, they are members of Province IV.

So, sixty Haitian Episcopal priests, like Pere Gracia, men and women, and countless lay folk, work tirelessly in the festering towns and dirt-poor countryside. They establish and maintain **200** churches and 220 schools. They travel by jeep, motorcycle, or horse or foot. They sometimes negotiate treacherous mountain trails and ford rivers – he crosses a lake in your case - to reach the thatched or concrete block or tin buildings that serve as churches, schools and clinics for their Haitian communities.

About half of those schools have American partners, like you now, but these are declining. We have lost American partners because of the pandemic years of course and, now, the **inability** to visit.... because ...

Well, because in many ways Haiti is in the midst of a tragic free fall. The situation in the capital, Port-au-Prince, is beyond words. Hundreds have been killed in gang wars. Kidnapping is rampant. In large sections of the city, people do not circulate even in their own neighborhoods unless absolutely necessary. Practically speaking, there is no federal government. There is no president and no functional justice system. Gas costs \$15 - \$25/gallon. Boats full of refugees are frequently intercepted at sea, or worse, found capsized, as people desperately seek a chance at life abroad. 3. The news cycle has dropped the sad story for the most part.

It's quieter and safer out in the countryside, like at Chapoteau, and our friends struggle along doing the best that they can... but the ramifications of the chaos in the cities - and on the roads leading there- are felt throughout the country. Food scarcity is now a huge issue.

So, this story is not simple.

But what I can say to you with absolute and unqualified conviction is this:

Your support for the kids at Lekol St. Mathiue these past years has made a real impact for real families. Otherwise parents couldn't afford even the small school fees. And, your help occurs in the midst of that broader context that is tragic, dysfunctional, and unjust. It's a context where progress is precious and bad news is ubiquitous.

Place a candle in the middle of a well-lit room. But then place that same candle in the middle of a pitch dark room, and the light shows very differently. That's what you are doing. 4.

We ache to get back there, to see Christ in our brothers and sisters eyes., and they in ours. We are one. Those of you who have traveled there, you know.

As my colleague, Serena, says, if we don't go, we are missing – the little boy in kindergarten who offers us his chair, the baby in the pink dress that someone in New York sent to Haiti, the man in the woman's hat with the black rose on it who cries when he prays, the beautiful singing that bubbles up during the prayers of the people - from the soul of the congregation, and scrubs my soul, the hero priests who hike miles sometimes through the heat and mud and dust to their congregations without even losing the crease in their pants, the first grade student who carefully wraps a portion of her school lunch rice and beans in a banana leaf to take home to a brother who cannot attend school and who has no lunch.

Our prayer is that one day we will be able to return and be together with our extended Episcopal family. For now, we do what we can. We have been inspired by our Haitian brothers and sisters ...

Like this -

A few years ago years ago on a Sunday morning the congregation of St. Andre's Church in Haiti's Central Plateau town of Hinche ... which is across the lake and not far from your Chapoteau ... that congregation invited the *very* poor people who live in that town's streets to come and worship with them. They did that once a month, maybe more. So, many very poor people came - people with no house, no roof over their heads, maybe they had no families... they came to Legliz St. Andre once a month to worship and then to *eat*, because after the mass, after worship, the congregation fed them *diri ak pwa* [rice and beans.] Now this is a whole "other" level of "street people," from what we think of when we hear that description.

Some of those who came had no legs. Many of them could not walk. Their arms were malformed too. There were little kids among them. They lived on the ground because they could not stand up. They moved in the dust and dirt, sliding along on pieces of wood or cardboard. They were dirty. You could smell them. Some of them could not speak.

So, on one of those special Sundays, before the mass we shared together, their priest, Pere Walin, asked me to help "Bless the chairs." But, I did not understand. He said Pere Roger, when I tell you to, "please bless the chairs." I said, "Mon pere, what chairs? Where are the chairs? " He told me, "you'll see; you will understand. And you will bless the chairs."

So, after that exchange, the worship began and we sang. – such wonderful singing in Haiti - we prayed, we listened to the Gospel, Pere Walin preached a long sermon, and then ... then he told the acolytes... “Alright. Now. Go get the chairs!” The acolytes went outside. They went behind the church in their very white albs, and they returned, each carrying a lawn chair... so, five, plastic lawn chairs. But, the parishioners of Andre’s had fixed those chairs...they had changed those chairs - they had attached old bicycle wheels to them. And so, they were wheel chairs now, home-made wheelchairs.

And then, Pere Walin said to the acolytes, “bring the people here.” The acolytes walked into the congregation, and they found five people who could not walk, five people, a couple of children, with no legs or twisted legs and broken bodies, many just sitting on the floor... and they picked them up, like little babies almost, and they carried them to the front of the church and gently placed them in those five chairs. And for the first time in their lives, those five people were not living down in the dust and dirt. They were sitting in chairs, wheel-chairs, and they could move! It was a miracle for them. It was a miracle. St. Andre’s fed their empty stomachs with rice and beans, but they also fed their empty souls.

And then Pere Walin said to me, “Pere Bowen, now... tanpri, please, bless the chairs.” But I could not speak. I could not say a word because I was crying. I was crying because they had fed my empty soul too. They had picked me up and put me in a new, beautiful place. They were the church doing its best work. Despite the distractions of a difficult life that you and I cannot even imagine, they were the hands of Jesus. They were feeding His sheep... those five sick people ... and they were feeding this priest - me, and they were feeding others in the congregation who watched this happen... and they were feeding many other people too, because I have told this story many times in the United States.

So, we learn from our Haitian brothers and sisters ... we learn so much. ... they do Kingdom work.

But, you know, we **also** learn from the broken people who were carried to those wheel-chairs. Scripture is most extraordinary because it repeatedly and invariably graces the people on the bottom, and not the people on the top. Examples? ... like the rejected son, the barren woman, the sinner, the leper, the outsider, the little boy with no legs who scoots around his village on a piece of cardboard.... **those** are often the ones chosen by God.

If we do not watch carefully, we’ll miss seeing deeper meaning in little moments. The little moments can become the banquet in this morning’s Gospel.

Our Haitian brothers and sisters draw people to Christ by showing us a light that is so lovely that we want with all of our hearts to know the source of it.

As Bishop Desmond Tutu once told us: “We are only the light bulbs, and our job is just to remain screwed in.” I think he could have been talking about *them*. They remain “screwed in.”

And so, as we prepare to share the bread and wine, let's be still again for a moment, and then we'll pray for children ... our children here, our children there.

we pray for children...
who put chocolate fingers everywhere
who like to be tickled
who stomp in puddles and ruin new pants
who sneak popsicles before supper
who erase holes in math workbooks
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for children
who stare at photographers from tent city pathways
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers
who never "counted potatoes"
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead in
who never go to the circus
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions
who sleep with the dog and bury goldfish
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money
who cover themselves with band aids and sing off key
who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink who slurp their soup

And we pray for those children
who never get dessert
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them
who watch their parents watch them die
who can't find any bread... to steal
who don't have any rooms to clean up
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday
who throw temper tantrums in the grocery store and who pick at their food
who like ghost stories
who shove dirty cloths under the bed and never rinse out the tub
who get visits from the tooth fairy
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool
who squirm in church and scream on the phone
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for children

whose nightmares come in the daytime
who will eat...anything
who have never seen a dentist
who aren't spoiled by anybody
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep
who live and move but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and those who must
for those we never give up on and those who never get a second chance
for those we smother...and for those who will grab the hand
of anybody kind enough to offer it. 6. We pray for children. AMEN

Footnotes:

1. *Prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake*
2. *Luke 14:13*
3. *Wynn Walent, Locally Haiti*
4. *"*
5. *Dr. Serena Beeks, current US coordinator for Haitian Episcopal Schools Partnerships*
6. *Ida Hughs via Marion Wright Edelman, Children's Defense*