

Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit and 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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### Looking for Hope in all the Wrong Places

I always begin my sermon preparation on Sunday evening—just to get a leg up, so to speak. That's what I did last Sunday evening. I reviewed the lectionary passages—and one of those was the passage from 1 Corinthians. It was the best of the bunch, to my mind. But as I began collecting ideas about 1 Corinthians, still on Sunday evening, my mind kept drifting to the events in Haiti. What I needed for myself was hope. I had no interest in dealing with body parts. And then I figured if I needed to hear a message of hope in regard to Haiti, maybe you did, too. So, early Monday morning, I determined to scrap 1 Corinthians and focus on the Roman's passage, you just heard a few minutes ago—one I chose myself and which has everything to do with hope and joy and peace, and all the things we long for in times of catastrophe. After sitting at my desk a while longer last Monday morning,, and not being able to come up with much in the way of hope, as it might relate to Haiti, I took off for Barnes and Nobles. At the bookstore, I gathered up as many newspapers and current magazines I could find—and sat in the café section, skimming every article about Haiti. My purpose was to find in all those articles, just a line or two that offered hope. When I found that line of hope, my plan was to craft an inspiring sermon around it—a sermon that would make us all breathe a sigh of relief, and we could all leave here today singing our Alleluias.

Sadly, though, I couldn't find any hope. Now here I will gladly admit that maybe it was my frame of mind. Every article I skimmed, though, and remember this was only a few days after the quake, every article I skimmed seemed to put me deeper and deeper into despair. In the Washington Post, for instance, I read about the growing lawlessness in Haiti, as mobs looted stores and vigilantes took justice into their own hands. In the New York Times I read about food and medical supplies collected and delivered, but still not distributed to the people who needed them. Another article commented on the injustice of it all—injustice wrought by God, perhaps? It was entitled "The Elite are Spared from much of the Devastation." Apparently, Haiti's well-heeled live in the cool, green Port au Prince suburb of Petionville, home to former presidents and senators. Although it was near the quake's epicenter, the area was relatively unscathed by the quake. And sad but true those elites weren't opening their homes to the newly homeless, just a few short miles down the road.

So then I thought to myself, "Surely the leader of Haiti has offered a word of hope to his people!" That's what leaders, do, right? But no, as of Monday morning, Haiti's President, Mr. Renee Garcia Prevel, had offered only this: The palace has fallen. Ministries have fallen. And not only that, the homes of many ministers have fallen. The police are not coming to work, relief agencies have collapsed. The UN has collapsed. It is hard to get ourselves in a place where we can help others."

MY last **hope** in my search for **hope** was in a front page article of Monday's NY Times. It was entitled, "Amid the Rubble, Seeking a Refuge in Faith." Ah. Here we go, right? Preacher Joseph Lejeune, his church pancaked in the disaster, held Sunday services in the open for his hurting flock. Over a loudspeaker he called out, "Think of our new village here as the home of Jesus Christ, not the scene of a disaster. Life is not a disaster. Life is joy! You don't have food? Nourish yourself with the Lord. You don't have water? Drink in the spirit." And I thought to myself, "Would I really be able to make that leap from despair to joy if one or all of my daughters had died in that quake, or if I and my family members had not had water in four days?"

Finally, I didn't experience hope when I read that other preachers were calling Haiti's catastrophe the Haitians' own fault. The NY times reported that a self-appointed preacher stood on a crate amid the rubble in Haiti's Champ de Mars district and "proclaimed that the earthquake was punishment for a long list of sins committed by the Haitians." And in still another article I read that here in the US, Pat Robertson made a similar statement. The reason for the Haitian disaster, he said, is that long ago, when the French occupied Haiti, the Haitians "made a pact with the devil" so that they could gain their independence. No hope in that. No compassion either.

"So, instead of focusing on hope, and Paul's message of hope in Romans," I thought to myself, "I guess I'll have to return to [pause] body parts. Maybe there will be something that we need to hear in this text after all, that, if not hopeful, at least in some way relates to the disaster in Haiti."

And that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to return us to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and hope that God has a message that we need to hear in that.

Paul founded the church in Corinth sometime in the 50's. Here's what we know about Corinth. It was an overpopulated city, with significant class divisions between the wealthy and powerful, and well, ordinary people. The reason for this wide divide between rich and poor may actually have been due to the way that Corinth was laid out. In the city of Corinth, urban villas were located right inside the city's walls—and the ground floor of these villas were store fronts, or workshops and studios run by the working class.. So, the rich and the powerful lived just above those who were, well, not so much. The wealthy and not so wealthy crossed paths every day. Their children probably played together in the streets, and when Paul started his church, it made sense that these people, came together to worship in the same church. But as you might expect, the Christians with money and prestige wanted and expected the same special status **inside** the church, that they enjoyed outside the church. So, for instance, when communion was served, and in those days, communion was a full meal and not just a morsel of bread and a taste of wine; when communion was served, the elites expected to be served first, and to get the most, while some folks actually left the table still hungry at the end of the meal. As might be expected, that same idea of hierarchy or privileged –and-not-so-privileged spilled over into other areas of church life. There were those in the community who thought their speaking in tongues, for instance, was to be valued over, say, the gift of healing, or the gift of prophesy. And so, Paul uses the metaphor of body parts as a way to explain to the folks in the church in Corinth that

each person in the community was to be valued and that in the church, Christ's church, there shouldn't be such a thing as hierarchy.

We understand metaphor, right? Body parts work together for the good of the whole—just as church members should work together for the good of the whole-- but **what if**, as one theologian I read this week conjectures, **what if** Paul also meant by way of metaphor to state a metaphysical fact? Think about that for a minute.

What if Paul had an insight, no doubt inspired by the holy spirit, which is only recently taking hold in scientific realms. You know used to be scientists had this notion that the world is like a gigantic clock. Each part contributes to the whole, but each part is independent of the whole, too. So, if one of the innards in a clock doesn't work right, take it out, dust it off, tighten a screw here and there, put it back in again, and the whole inner workings are restored to normal.

Now, though, we are learning through the study of something called quantum physics that the various parts of our known universe are so interconnected that they can't be easily separated, lopped off, or taken out, fixed and returned, without seriously disturbing or utterly destroying the whole. So for instance, scientists know that just by **looking** at an electron in their powerful microscopes, they change the way it acts. Isn't that mind boggling? And, it is suspected that something as innocuous as an Australian puppy's sneeze, could create a wind turbulence in Jamaica—or something like that. There is a great mystery, which we believers call God—and that mystery binds us and the entire universe together in ways we can't even begin to fathom.

And that, of course, is why we humans are so devastated when we learn that part of us, those folks in Haiti, are hurting. At some gut, or intuitive or spiritual level, we know that their pain is our pain, too. We know deep down that we ARE our brother's keeper—and we may suspect even more than that—we may even suspect that we really **are** our brothers (and our sisters, too.) When someone receives a blow, we all bruise. When someone gets cut, we all bleed. That, my friends, is the message for us in 1 Corinthians this week following the earthquake in Haiti. We are all part of a whole.

I do want to return, though, to our first scripture reading this morning, and the subject of hope. Now that the week has played out, we are beginning to read about hope in the newspapers. We read that people are getting the care they need—orphans are finding homes or at least foster homes; folks are performing heroic acts, to return some semblance of order to Haiti. There is even some talk that with all the focus on Haiti perhaps for many of the survivors, their material lives **after** the earthquake will be better than their material lives before the earthquake.

Looking back on my little excursion to Barnes and Nobles, I think now that I was wrong to look for hope so early after the disaster in Haiti. It's all about process isn't it--I had forgotten that. First you take in the news. Then you live with that sense of helplessness and hopelessness for awhile. You grieve. Maybe you shake a fist at God and demand to know why? And then, finally, in that interaction with God, if you are blessed, and we're all blessed, hope just comes. The thing is, you try to jump to hope too quickly, you try to avoid the pain, and it's like slapping a bandaid on a gaping wound.

And one more thing I learned from my little excursion to Barnes and Noble. The last place you want to go to find hope is the newspaper. Why did I ever think to try there first? Let all the people say, Amen

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