

January 24, 2010

1 Corinthians 12:1-31

Don't Send Anyone Away!

The suffering in Haiti is unimaginable, isn't it? Even when the news shows picture after picture, video after video, it's still impossible to really comprehend. Buildings in ruins, people digging frantically through the rubble trying to rescue other people, voices coming from under the collapsed buildings only to grow faint and then silenced before rescuers can dig deep enough to save them.

Bodies are buried in mass graves and survivors crowd the port and airport trying to get out.

It all seems like too much to stand, and at times I have had to turn off the tv and stop reading the paper because I just can't handle thinking about it any more.

But why does this news from several thousand miles away disturb me so much? I don't know anyone who lives in Haiti. I've never been to Haiti. I don't even know anyone who is FROM Haiti. There is no personal connection between me and any of this tremendous suffering. So why am I so saddened, so distressed?

But I am not the only one. Many of you have reacted the same way. And Friday night many celebrities and entertainers got together to put on a show called "Hope for Haiti" and raised a lot of money to help the earthquake victims. Not only were the celebrities caring and concerned, but so was caller after caller, many very emotional in their statements about why they wanted to help the people of Haiti.

Why do huge tragedies like the one in Haiti affect us so much? We reacted the same way to the tsunami the day after Christmas a few years ago, and the same way to Hurricane Katrina.

It seems like we just have to do something when tragedy strikes. It's in our hard-wiring to want to DO SOMETHING!! We can't just sit there!

We are created to be compassionate, to care, to help, even when we don't know the people who are suffering. Even when they live half a world away.

John Donne, the famous English poet, once wrote—

No man is an island entire of itself

Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main

If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,

as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind.

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls.

It tolls for thee.

This is the way that John Donne talks about our connection with each other, and he is exactly right. We are all involved in humanity, and so there is a deep link with each other, a compassion and an empathy that is inescapable.

Donne uses secular language that does not make it any less true, but it doesn't exactly explain WHY we are so involved with each other, so connected to each other.

To talk about the reasons for this connection, we need to turn to a theologian, to someone who can put it in “God language” for us.

And so we turn to the great theologian, the apostle Paul, who tells us why.

It’s because we are all part of the body of Christ. The connection is more intimate, more inter-related than being “involved with mankind.” The connection is an interdependency, a mutual reliance on the gifts and talents and faith and love and hope of each other!

When all those celebrities got together Friday evening for a cause they called “Hope For Haiti,” they were also building hope for themselves, hope for us. Because if one part of the body of Christ loses hope, we all lose hope.

A hand cannot lose hope without the foot feeling that loss. The eye cannot keep on hoping if the ear can't hear the reason to hold on to hope.

The arm cannot keep digging for survivors if the heart has lost hope. The heart cannot keep hoping if the arm has lost its strength, if its talent for digging has dried up and is no longer useful.

Haiti is a part of the body of Christ. Did you see the pictures of the collapsed cathedral with people praying outside of it? Did you see the video of the woman being rescued who was singing "Don't be Afraid of Death"? Her husband had waited for days, never losing hope that she would be rescued, and then she was pulled from the rubble singing! That is hope! To sing in such a situation! Hope and faith and joy!

The body of Christ is injured in Haiti, but it is not dead!

And so we are all still alive in Christ, we all still have reason to hope. But we are all also broken. When one part of the body is broken, we all feel the pain.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, there were many threats to the body of Christ----persecution, temptations, pressure from society and from family and friends. Today there are still many threats to Christ's body----pressure from society which questions the relevance of the church, temptations, distractions, and more.

And yet, both then and now, some of the threats come from within the body. It's kind of like an auto-immune disease, where the body attacks itself.

In Paul's time, there were people who felt that speaking in tongues was a higher gift than others. Their thinking was that if you spoke in tongues then you were a better Christian than other people. Paul set the record straight.

There are many spiritual gifts, he wrote, none more important than others. All of the gifts are needed and useful.

No part of the body of Christ is worthy of more respect than any other. In point of fact, he writes, the parts of the body that we consider more shameful are in reality worthy of more respect.

So while we might think that being a preacher or a theologian or a prophet is a higher gift, really it's the plumbers and the custodians who deserve our respect more.



It's the engineers and the masons and the construction crews who can design and build buildings that don't fall down in earthquakes who just may have the most valuable gifts.

They are the ones working behind the scenes to keep things running smoothly. They are the foundations of the Kingdom of God.

So Haiti, the poorest country in the hemisphere, is worthy of more respect, and I think we are seeing why!

Hope is there. Even when there is no reason for hope, even when tens of thousands, maybe 100,000(!) people are dead, and many times that are homeless, they still hope. They still rise up singing from the places that could have been their graves.

And Haiti as a whole will be rebuilt. The country will experience resurrection in a very real way as countries from around the world continue to come together to help rescue, rebuild, and then re-envision what Haiti can be.

The poorest part of the body of Christ will be covered with new respect by the rest of the body because of the hope that is rising out of the devastation.

So what does this mean for us, here at Linda Vista United Methodist Church in San Diego?

We have reached out to the people of Haiti by donating money for rebuilding. Before that we reached out to the Philippines when there were floods, and last summer we reached out to victims of a house fire here in San Diego--- victims who, if you remember, were immigrants from Haiti.

Next summer we will reach out in a different way to victims of Hurricane Katrina by going there in person to help families rebuild their homes.

We know that the body of Christ is living in all parts of the world, and that we can help.

We can help build the Kingdom of God by using our financial resources, by using our physical strength, and of course by lifting our prayers.

We are not sending our money, our labor, or our prayers off to somewhere else, never to be seen or known again, with the results known only to someone else, someone far, far away

As Donne says, the bell tolls for us, but not the bell that announces death. The bell that tolls for us is the bell that rings to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God, to announce that the angels in heaven rejoice, to announce the wedding between the Church and Jesus Christ.

No one is an island entire of itself. Haiti is an island, yes, but in the aftermath of this horrible earthquake, we can see the bridge from here to there.

And the bridge's name is Jesus Christ!

The title of this sermon is “Don’t Send Anyone Away.” To be honest, when I came up with that title I had a completely different message in mind. When I tried to write that sermon, it just wasn’t working and finally I figured out that this was the message I needed to give instead.

But the title still fits, it just means something different.

Don’t send anyone away!

One of the many parables that Jesus told was about a man going to his neighbor’s house in the middle of the night and knocking and knocking, asking the neighbor for bread to feed to some unexpected guests. The neighbor does not send him away, but gives him some bread.

Jesus told us that if we give people what they need, then it's the same as doing it for him. Bread, water, clothing, taking care of them when they are sick or in prison, or trying to rebuild a home or bandage an injury, when we take care of those needs, we are serving Jesus Christ.

How does that work? By transference or osmosis or just metaphorically? It works, it's the truth, because we are all the body of Christ. By serving each other, we serve Christ.

If we ignore or fail to meet each other's needs, we fail to serve Christ.

Not only do the deaths of others diminish all of us, but the suffering, the brokenness, the unmet needs of others also diminish all of us.

When we send anyone away without meeting their needs, the body of Christ remains broken. When we fail to minister to, fail to love, anyone, then we, as the body of Christ is not all that we were created to be.

And so, let's not send anyone away. Let's care for and serve everyone who comes to us. Now, I know we don't have infinite money and resources, but there are several things we can do to serve in other ways.

First, we can welcome anyone who comes to us for fellowship or for help. Sometimes help is showing them what agencies can help them, or just giving them a bite to eat.

Second, we can write to our representatives urging social policies that make sure all people are taken care of in whatever ways we think are best.

Third, we can support non-profit agencies whose mission it is to take care of people's needs.

Last, and certainly not least, we can pray. If we are then moved to serve the body of Christ in physical, financial, or other ways, we need to follow through. But prayer always changes things, and intercessory prayer is the most important thing we can do!

Don't turn anyone away! Open the door, the gates, of the Kingdom of God to all people, everywhere! The body of Christ will be more complete, more healed, more effective, with every person who comes into the Kingdom!

Amen!