

Sermon for Peace in Christ, Elizabeth Colorado, January 23rd, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

(Please sit)

Good morning, my name is Simon Caddick and I am a parishioner at St. Tim's Episcopal Church in Centennial and I am very pleased to be with you today. I'm a board member of Locally Haiti and it is in that capacity that Pastor Alena invited me to give a reflection today. It is, in fact, through Locally Haiti that Alena and I first met when we were on a trip to Haiti together in January 2019. I'd to tell you a bit about Locally Haiti and maybe by connecting it to the readings connect you to it.

Firstly, though, let me paraphrase the start of the first reading from Nehemiah. *All the people gathered together to hear the scriptures read and given interpretation from early morning until midday.* I can't promise much profound insight in interpretation, but I can guarantee that we won't go on until midday!

Locally Haiti, as an organization, goes back over 30 years. You may have heard of it as the Colorado Haiti Project as we only changed the name last year. It was founded by Fr. Octave Lafontant of the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti and two Episcopal priests from Colorado – Fathers Ed Morgan and Dale Casey. From its origins with a focus on medical missions where medical volunteers went out to a

pretty inaccessible part of rural Haiti it has evolved to a more holistic approach. This new way is more locally sustained and integrates clinics with over 40 community health workers and education in the form of St. Paul's school. It promotes gender equality with the girls empowerment and mentoring program (GEM for short) that involves more than 150 girls and young women. There is also economic development in agricultural projects such as animal husbandry and bee keeping and support for women in small business. This is all centered on the rural township of Petit Trou which is in the south-west peninsula of the island and the campus of St. Paul's just outside of town. In essence the approach of Locally Haiti is to put resources directly into people's hands and that allows that investment to circulate and grow locally, improving livelihoods one community at a time through the initiative of local activists such as Patrick Desir, someone who I first met in 2015. Patrick is a key leader in Locally Haiti not least with GEM and, by the way, the father of two beautiful sons.

I can't say that Nehemiah is one of my go to books in the Bible for guidance and looking at a couple of commentaries didn't inspire me either but I find it striking that these patient people were told to be joyful in the Lord and to rejoice – to eat the fat and drink sweet wine - but also to share portions with those for whom

nothing has been prepared. There is a social dimension that is to include the less fortunate.

“Ah!” – you might say – “the less fortunate. The poor. That is why we should care about Haiti, such a poor country stricken by so many natural disasters”. Well, it is true that Haiti is poor and has had its natural catastrophes including the unimaginable devastation of the 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Last August there was an earthquake which had Petit Trou at its epicenter. When it struck Patrick Desir was eating breakfast with his two small children in Petit Trou. He pulled them up by their arms, one each, and rushed them down to the yard, where they huddled together, praying. After consoling them and then sitting them down with their aunt in the family courtyard, Patrick got to work surveying the damage in his community, helping at the site of fallen buildings, and coordinating among local partners. Patrick certainly needs support but not I suggest because of charity.

Scripture was read and interpreted in the reading from Luke. Not in a big square but in the small synagogue in Nazareth. In Luke this is where Jesus clearly begins his ministry, and he takes a text from Isaiah that also pointedly includes the poor. But this doesn't sound like the sort of charitable concern of Nehemiah. This is

more powerful, compelling even. This sounds less like charity and more like justice. And justice, as the great scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann says, justice is sorting out what belongs to whom and giving it back to them. “Ah justice! – that is why we should do our bit for Haiti”. Well yes and no. Certainly, Haiti has suffered from its unfair share of injustice from its origins as a colonial slave state to that injustice inflicted on it from outside powers and the depredations of corrupt rulers and political violence. But they don’t need more outside interference – as one 19th century Haitian statesman, Louis-Joseph Janvier put it, “please spare us your advice – we want to do things ourselves”. It is that empowerment of local leaders and collaboration between the Coloradan and Haitian wings of Locally Haiti that is crucial.

While charity is important and justice is necessary, I suggest that both Nehemiah and the passage not only quoted by Jesus but realized in him, point to something that is most clearly seen in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. – “all are members of one body.... If one member suffers all suffer together”. This something that has been described by the Jesuit priest Greg Boyle as “kinship” where community expands with no division. Fr Greg quotes Mother Teresa as saying, “we’ve forgotten that we belong to each other”. Each of us as people of faith can expand our kinship in many ways. Locally Haiti provides one way to connect and create

kinship with a particular community in Haiti – a community across borders such as God might recognize. A community which you can support with your gifts, with your interest and with your refusal to accept the easy, caricature narrative often propagated about Haiti in the media as a failed state and listen instead to the voices of those who find their strength in the joy of the Lord. Here are two such voices. The first from Raphael Fernandez Salvador, director of Agricultural Initiatives. Last August he wrote:

"Before the earthquake of August 14, the socio-economic situation in Petit Trou was extremely difficult. Now, the earthquake has brought us to our knees. It has darkened the situation we were already living. Since August 14, we have been working with extreme urgency. In that sense, we thank friends like you for your support and for helping us to stand up together. With your help, we local leaders have been able to put our commitment to the community into practice. It has helped us go out and help the most vulnerable quickly. The needs are many, and we hope you can continue to support us in this work. May God bless you.

Thank you, Raphael"

The second voice belongs to Guilot Tibert – the administrator of the parish of St. Paul's. He writes at a time of violence and natural disaster but this time it is

Colorado the week before Christmas when we witnessed another mass shooting and the fires in Boulder.

Guilot writes:

It was with great sadness and pain that I learned of the fires that have destroyed so much around Boulder, Colorado. I take a moment to send you all my deepest sympathy and prayers. You have been there for us, please know that in our own way, we are there for you.

With wishes for a safe New Year, and that we all continue to stick together and lift one another up.

These are the voices of kinship.

Amen