

Let us pray.

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace; Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly Union and Concord: that , as there is but one Body, and one Spirit, and one Hope of our Calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart, and of one soul, united in one holy bond of Truth and Peace, of Faith and Charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (BCP pg 818 prayer 14)

Amen!

In the past week we have been bombarded by the images and stories coming from Haiti. We have seen the numerous before and after the earthquake photos especially of the one of the once pristine presidential palace. We have heard of the suffering of the Haitian people and the pivotal slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Overture that resulted in her independence from the French in 1804. We have heard about the decades of dictatorship under Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and then later his son, Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier. Most of us might even remember her hopeful attempt at democracy with former Roman Catholic priest turned politician, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. We have been reminded daily of the poverty of her people who have suffered every kind of natural or manmade disaster, from hurricanes and mudslides to HIV/AIDS and military coups, and now this! It's unimaginable! Just when we thought it couldn't get any worst! How do we as Christians make sense of the suffering of our brothers and sisters? Do we like some in the media foolishly suggest her suffering is the result of a pact made with the devil to secure her independence because of her peoples' voodoo beliefs, or God's wrath on her for these voodoo practices, or because of the frequency of the earthquakes can we view it as God's imminent return, or can we liken her struggles to the Biblical Israelites, a people chosen by God for a specific task at a specific time?

Whatever the case, here in Connecticut as Episcopalians, we have a unique bond with the Haitian people. More than 80% of Haiti's 9 million citizens are Roman Catholics with the remaining 16% or so, who are Protestants. Among that group is an Episcopal diocese that was started as a missionary church by the first African-American bishop, James Theodore Holly and members of St. Luke's Episcopal Church-New Haven in 1861. This relationship continues today through more than 18 of our parishes that have partnership relations with churches, schools and social service agencies in Haiti. Oddly enough this is a church that began, according to Bishop's Holly's 1897 account, in *The Facts About the Church's Mission in Haiti*, in the spacious hall of the private presidential mansion with the baptism of a child, born to one of the passengers on board the ship that took Bishop Holly and some members of St. Luke's to Haiti. So this morning as we gather as a community here in Collinsville and reflect on our blessings, mission and ministry in the past year, and look to the challenges and set goals for the next year, what will be our spiritual practice in light of all that is occurring in our community, this nation and the world?

Perhaps we can take our lead from the apostle Paul, who reminds us in today's epistle that as the church, we are the risen body of Christ. As such, we need each other and the gifts we individually bring to do God's will. None of us can do God's work alone! Like the body, we need our hands and fingers to lift food to our mouths to be nourished; just like the ladies and Maddy of the altar guild who beautify and prepare the altar for every service; to remind us of the bountiful blessings God continues to bestow upon us even in this terrible economy. We need our feet to stand upright and make us mobile; just like the vestry who ensures this is a safe space for our children and elderly, and makes certain we have heat and electricity so we can fellowship on these premises week after week. Can you imagine coming here on a cold winter's morning to worship and there is no heat in this building because the treasurer and administrator forgot to pay the bill? There would be lots of heads spinning! Our faith, our being as a Christian relies on relationship and communication in community.

In today's reading the Corinthians had behaved badly. They were squabbling over who had the most important task in the church and who among them were true Christians. Paul

tells them that it doesn't matter if they were Jew or Greek, slave or free because they were all made to share in one Spirit. In other words, we cannot do God's work in isolation! That is why we are here today. We have come to be strengthened. We have come to be fed. We have come to share at a table that ties us to millions of Christians in Haiti, Africa, England, Arizona and around the world who from the beginning of Christian history offered table hospitality! And in this way, we respond to God's grace in our lives by believing in the One who said, **'I will be with you always'**, and then practicing our belief whether by donating funds to the Canton food bank, or providing a meal and a clean, friendly place for a grieving family to receive friends after a memorial service. But wait, our roles do not end here!

At times we have those light bulb moments; those times when through the darkness we see light; when we are withdrawn from our regular way of life by trials and testing, and reminded of how great God is, and that He is always with us; a time when we recognize the divine source of creation and the law in our hectic lives. Take the Israelites, for example from today's Nehemiah reading, who had been exiled and God had not only brought them back, but had helped them rebuild their city. On hearing Ezra read from the law, they had their light bulb moment. They remembered God's blessings on them and repentantly began to pray and weep. They were ashamed of how far they had strayed from the law, but Ezra tells them to be joyful, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and make merry and share with those who have nothing prepared.' This call is for us too; to share with those who have little or none in whatever small way we can.

And today as we meet as a congregation to accept a budget, elect new vestry members and approve programs by various organizations within this community, we will display our spiritual practice. We will practice incarnation. We will make plans to mutually work in this community and the broader church. We will host programs and get to know people whom we will not only welcome to this community, but also show the love of Christ that is in all of us. We will show through our giving whether it be through our finances, talents or time. They all count and this community needs it all. Did I say we need your finances? After all, we have everything we need here in this community. We just have to start emptying out those pockets.

Remember everything we have and everything we are is to be used for Christ's service. It is like an entire spectrum of colors not just black or white! We all have something to give, even little Owen with his adorable, shy smile, or little Ziggy's cooing throughout the service to remind us of our responsibility to take care of those in this community who cannot or who have lost the ability to care for themselves.

So this morning as you come to share in Christ at the Table, to the hymn, *Just as I am*, remember God loves you as you are, and so do we! We can't all be Lindas, or Skips, or Pegs, or Dougs! We each complement this community in our unique way, and if you are unsure of where you fit, I am sure any member of this parish leadership will be willing to find a role for you here in this community. There is always an opening for a soul in need of work or direction. So continue to give generously of your time and talent, but most importantly to love and serve Christ in this community and the world. And perhaps if there is anything that we can discern from the plight of the Haitian people, it is that God is among us, with us and in us, and our generosity to the Haitian people shows the love of Christ in us!

AMEN!