

"Speak Up!"

A meditation in the style of Martin Luther King, Jr.

based on Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; and John 2:1-11

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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What can we say after a week like this? As people of faith—Christian faith—a faith with only two laws: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself—what do we say in the face of such terrible and complete destruction? Do we lay blame—on God? On the devil? On the Haitian people themselves? Do we theologize, assuming that Divine punishment or God's will somehow is being effected through a 7.1 earthquake? What can we say as people of faith in the face of such tragedy?

With all due respect, I know I can say that I don't think Mr. Robertson follows the lectionary, or he would have been more circumspect in his comments about Haiti earlier this week. And those other religious leaders, blaming everyone from gay people to progressives to the neighbors on the other side of the island—I can say that I have doubts about their bedside manner as well. When life is at its lowest, it is not the time to add to the despair wrought by the unpredictable movements of the earth. When life is at its lowest, people of faith, it is time to speak of hope. And hope, it is, that we hear in today's readings.

"Speak up!" declares the prophet Isaiah to the exiles who have returned to rebuild their destroyed homeland. What a fitting passage to read on this day, for in it and through it, hope resounds. Sadly, the return from Babylon and the initial rebuilding had not gone as smoothly as predicted by an earlier Isaiah. Life for the returnees in Judah remained very harsh. In these

difficult circumstances there was both economic oppression and religious chaos. With a backdrop of buildings destroyed and culture in shambles, the prophet Isaiah dares to announce that God will deliver the people soon and very soon. While picking up rubble and trying to locate loved ones, the prophet grabs the attention of the returnees by declaring that money will come pouring in from all around the world, that the shame and sorrow of the recent past will be replaced with eternal joy and prosperity. This, people of faith, this is what we say in the face of such tragedy. We say, in God's realm, tragedy never, never has the final word. We say, in God's realm, blame and shame have no place. We say, when thousands died, God's was the first of all hearts to break and God was the first to cry. In God's compassionate realm, we say to our Haitian sisters and brothers, we will love you through this...with our checkbooks...with our prayers...with our actions. For our religion has only two laws: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

"Use your gifts...quit bickering about them!" declares the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian Christians who seem hell-bent on arguing how many angels can dance on that pin while their world waits to be loved. Again, a fitting passage for today, showing the utter ridiculousness of theological wrangling when people are hurting. Here, Paul moderates a raging debate among the believers about the proper use of spiritual gifts, and he keeps hammering on one point and one point alone: all gifts, no exception, are allocated by the Spirit as the Spirit chooses and for the common good. Therefore, Corinthians, bragging about one's gifts has no place in the Christian community. Comparing your gift with another is also out of place, as is using your gift to compete with one another for status. These are harsh and direct words from Paul to the believers at Corinth; yet I am convinced they are not intended to reprimand, but to dramatically refocus. Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to see that spiritual gifts are as varied as the people receiving them precisely because the Spirit itself is infinitely creative. So stop bragging,

stop comparing, stop competing, writes Paul. Start thanking God for the gifts you have been given; then quickly figure out how you can use your particular gift to further the common good. An apt message as we wring our hands while watching those desperate images this past week. This, people of faith, this is what we say and do in the face of such tragedy. We say with our actions, that in God's realm, everyone has a gift or two given by the Spirit for just such a time as this. We say by our actions, that in God's realm, bragging and competition have no place. We say, when thousands die and millions are left homeless, we must be among those who go to help. For our religion has only two laws: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Finally, we hear from Jesus today. Surprisingly, he is reticent at first, like a child whose mother has told him about something that needs to be done—picking up his bicycle in the driveway or talking to his cousin at the birthday party. “Not now, Mom, later...Why are you telling me?...How is this my problem?” We parents know that tone all too well! In the story of the wedding at Cana, Mary reports to her son that the wine has run out and, in the words of Asian feminist theologian (and my friend from seminary) Chung Hyun Kyung, this act shows the “Mary factor” at work. Hyun Kyung notes that Mary has raised Jesus to practice “compassionate justice” and this is his first public test. Mary's action shows “...that she is a woman with all the compassionate sensitiveness to other people's needs...” She requests that Jesus do what he has been raised to do: to respond to the need at hand, with a simple kind of ordinary, earthy compassion for the embarrassed host, an ordinary compassion whose result is extraordinary! The compassionate justice taught by Mary and practiced here by Jesus literally overflows in this story with an abundance of new wine, the best-tasting wine of all, wine that started out being something as ordinary as water; placed in extraordinary vessels: six large stone jars kept separate to hold ritual water for purification. An ordinary gift in an

extraordinary vessel, now transformed through the compassion of Mary and Jesus for the work of God in the most human of circumstances. People of faith, here is yet another important message for us who shake ourselves at the magnitude of the job ahead. This is who we follow in the face of such tragedy. In God's realm, when tragedy strikes, we do not wander aimlessly. We follow the Ones who find empty jars and fill them with water and—like the miracle that he and she are and that their story calls us to be also—we give this new wine to our siblings in Haiti so that they might safely and joyfully drink. In God's realm, with justice that is always compassionate, we pray and we wait and we pray and we watch and we pray and we move when nudged by that self-same Spirit to act. For our religion has only two laws: Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

It was a cold January of 1946, and Pastor Martin Niemöller was offering a speech to the representatives of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt, Germany. The war was ended, Hitler had been defeated, but at the cost of millions upon millions of lives, and this theologian was now chiding his own Christian sisters and brothers for their inaction following the Nazi rise to power. Niemöller's words are the stuff of legend. He said prophetically,

“First they came for the communists,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a communist;  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a trade unionist;  
Then they came for the Jews,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me—

and there was no one left to speak out.”

What can we say, people of faith, when we face a week like this one past? As has been evidenced, we can say a lot. But as my mother used to say, “...your actions speak so loud I cannot hear a word you are saying...” So, people of faith, how shall we speak up? How shall we use our gifts? How shall we follow the One we call Christ? How shall we put our words into action to benefit the people of Haiti? Shall we send money? At least... Shall we send clothing and supplies? I hope so... When the whistle blows for volunteers to help rebuild, shall we answer the call by sending ourselves as we did when Katrina hit New Orleans? Of course we should and we will. And in the meantime, let us speak words of hope, let us argue convincingly on the side of compassionate justice, and let us continue working avidly with this God of all hope; for this is how we speak up and use our gifts and follow the teachings of a simple, compassionate peasant Mother and Son team from Nazareth.

Amen and Blessed Be!