

MEDITATIONS

August 22, 2010, Binkley Baptist Church

TESSA BENJAMIN:

I first received news of the earthquake in Haiti via a panicked phone call from my mother in Miami. She had obviously been crying, and had no news of our family in Haiti. Both of my parents were born and raised in Haiti, and at the time they moved to the United States, they were among the very few in their extended families to leave permanently. The vast majority of our family was in Haiti on January 12th, and many lived in Port-au-Prince. In the hours after we all first learned of the earthquake, we waited, watched the horrific events unfold on the news, and searched for signs our family was safe. I made phone calls and messaged online, to friends and relatives, who for the most part also knew nothing. I imagined what could have happened to each of my family members. Hours passed, and we heard fragments of information, often conflicting with each other.

The earthquake hit on late Tuesday afternoon. It was not until Thursday morning that I knew what had become of my closest relatives. Because the earthquake hit around the time work was ending, even those who lived on the same property waited and searched for each other for hours. It turns out most were safe, but had lost their houses. My mother's uncle, Gerald, had not made it out of his house in time to survive. His wife, also in the house at the time it crumbled, had a number of serious injuries. Everyone was traumatized. Some of my family had dug Gerald and his wife out of their home, and buried Gerald themselves. My mother's immediate family had enough food to last them until they could leave the country for a while, but struggled with the intense odor from a nearby collapsed supermarket, a constant reminder of how many lives had been claimed. Everyone had lost people they knew, though it would be months until they could even account for all of those they lost. My father lost many of his friends. His cousin had buried his wife and two young daughters.

As I do my best to recount *some* of the events of the earthquake as my family experienced them, I realize I that my own ability to understand their experiences is limited. I could never begin to imagine what anyone actually in Haiti felt or continues to feel as they rebuild their lives. What is clear to me is that the level of devastation was and still is absolutely indescribable. What is perhaps more important to note is that even though some members of my family have suffered hardships that I will never fully understand without having experienced them firsthand, I know that in many ways, at least some of them are among the more fortunate touched by the disaster. They have food. By now they have provided each other with shelter again. Those who wanted to were able to leave the country, at least for a while as they got back on their feet. Needless to say, this is not the case for everyone.

An estimated 1.5 million people have been displaced by the earthquake. Many of those people are living in tent cities, so many in fact that some of those tents are set up along hazardous areas such as major roads. Many people who lack shelter also need medical care, i. A staggering percentage of pledges to Haiti by foreign countries, including the U.S, have not been honored. Rubble removal is still slow. Just to give you an idea of just one of the challenges Haiti is facing, I recently read that according to international experts, it would take three to five years to remove all the debris from Haiti if 1,000 or more trucks worked daily; fewer than 300 trucks are hauling rubble now. In some places, even wheelbarrows cannot be used due to great numbers of steep alleys. Rubble has to be carried out pail by pail.

This is not to say that there have not been any successes in the recovery efforts. Due to the hard work of many people, both contributing from abroad and in Haiti, both foreign and Haitian, there have not been any major outbreaks of disease. After a few weeks of watching everything I could find in the news about Haiti in

January, I decided to turn off the television and take some time to collect myself. When I felt ready to turn it on again, any mention of Haiti was gone. After the last known person was pulled out of the rubble about a month later, I struggled to find any news. Such is the nature of the response to many major disasters: An initial great outpouring of support and media coverage, then little to none.

Even with my connections to Haiti, I am guilty of not doing all that I can. And of course, there are many tragedies which too easily fade from our collective memories, but from which people continue to suffer. The work that we have done as a congregation is so significant, and it is important that it continue. I hope that we look at the work we have done so far not feeling completely satisfied that we have “done our part”, but rather grateful that we were able to contribute to a great, great need, and even more inspired to continue.

I would also hope that people learn more about Haiti, beyond poverty. I don't want to gloss over the fact that there is a great amount of suffering in Haiti, now more than ever, but there is *still* so much more to Haiti's story than misery. There is such a proud history and rich culture. There is unbelievable resilience. Despite issues with deforestation and now of course the earthquake, there is still a lot of natural beauty. I would often bring back pictures after having spent summers in Haiti with my family, of mountains and beaches, outdoor markets, certain buildings and have them say “Oh....that's *Haiti?*”, which for me always felt a little odd to hear because...well... yes. It is a tropical island in the Caribbean, which actually had a pretty good tourism business before it was falsely accused by the CDC of being the origin of AIDS. The Haiti I know is rarely much like it is portrayed on the news. It worth preserving and supporting and rebuilding for many more reasons than I think most people know. Let us mutually encourage and inspire each other not to let Haiti be forgotten.

RALF SCHMID:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak this morning. Let me first say a few general words to set the stage for the 3 mediations about Social Justice that you are about to hear. Social Justice. While there are many definitions, especially in political science, I think we can all agree that this is one of the important elements of Christianity reflecting the example of Jesus standing up for those who have been marginalized by society or struggling to get the same opportunities as others. When Jesus stood up for the foreigners in Israel, the sick, the children, the ones working for the Romans, the widows, the homeless and the poor, he attempted to demonstrate that these have the same value among all God's children and deserve the same recognition and opportunities. In Matthew 5:6 we read his call to all of us: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” As Christians we have the special obligation to ask continuously ask whether our present society lives up Jesus' standards, to check whether justice is done to all of God's children. We all have heard of the great struggles of Christians in this country to achieve equality for all people regardless of the color of their skin, and how Dr. Martin Luther King paid with his live for speaking up against injustice. This is a great heritage to preserve and to continuously further fight for. God does not appreciate ignorance or shrugging your shoulders, he wants us to follow Jesus in standing up for justice and peace, for in Revelation 3 we read: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

My topic for today is education. With the school year for many about to start this is on everybody's mind right now. We all remember the reminder of our parents of the importance of a good education as a key to a good life and that we need to try as hard as we can at school. Well, indeed a good education has served many of us well to achieve prestigious positions, interesting things to do and well paying jobs. Graduating from high school and getting at least some college degree is what we would hope for everybody to achieve who has been blessed by God with the abilities. And a recent surge of enrollment numbers

especially at community colleges seems to reiterate this. But does everybody who is able even has the chance to get this far?

Unfortunately, success in primary education varies a lot among students and does not allow or encourage all students to reach up to the highest level of the abilities they would be able to develop. It is undeniable that school systems more often fail economically disadvantaged and minority students and created an achievement gap between student subgroups. Most recently, both Chapel Hill high schools did not achieve the goals set by the No Child Left Behind Act¹, which demands adequate improvement among all racial and economic subgroups; and Frank-Graham-Porter Elementary school is entering the 3rd year of sanctions. What is happening in a school district once regarded one of the best in the country and probably still better than many, many other districts? Recently, *Newsweek* Magazine published an article written by McKinsey analysts “How to close the achievement gap” - so, there is no lack on expert advice what should be done. All experts agree that more needs to be done than just calling for better funding. There seem to be systemic problems so that the needs of a considerable number of students are not addressed. However, there are many other ways for everybody of us to help improvement, such as working towards getting parents better involved, breaking down language barriers with those parents who simply cannot communicate with an English-only speaking teacher, or helping with tutoring of students who need extra help. The current economic situation has probably made it worse for many families, with additional stress about job security or unemployment, the need to have multiple jobs, or even that teenagers need to work rather than to study. A concern for our community is the pending search for a new superintendent and the deliberations by the school board whether to choose somebody from the current administration rather than conducting real search for the best qualified person.

Beyond this, one of our biggest concerns is what is happening right now with the educational system in Wake County. The new school board has openly declared that socioeconomic status and race will not be a consideration anymore for school assignment. Everybody fears that this will lead to a number of schools with high rates of students from these groups, which may lead without intervention to a further drop of achievement among these students. One of the great things in Chapel Hill and Carrboro is that students from all kinds of economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds are present at each school. I am convinced that in my son's class many students got a unique new experience and new dreams when over the course of the year parents who are lawyers, PhD scientists, doctors and politicians participated in teaching. We need to show students ways to achieve whatever they want according to their abilities and not according to who their parents are. In Wake County, however, a strong movement is present to exclude many students and rather to only ensure that the students from affluent families can succeed. This movement may be legal but clearly violates Christian ethics. That's why many encouraged Christians, including members of this congregation and friends from Pullen Memorial, felt called to stand up and protest against the threat of a possible resegregation of schools, and this does not only refer to racial but also economic resegregation.

I challenge you to prayerfully reflect how you can contribute to social justice in our education system. As I have already mentioned, there are many equally good ways. You may be able to use your job or community function to influence decision makers, volunteer at schools, help to get involved other parents, educate other people about the problems or even actively protest – but please do not become ignorant towards how our future leaders are educated and who gets the opportunity to be educated to serve this country. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

MICHAEL PALMER

Gaby and the Dream Act

Gabriela is the kind of student every teacher dreams of having. She always arrives with enthusiasm and a smile on her face. She does her work with joy and is a leader in the class. She is brilliant. The other students call her simply, Gaby, and they follow her lead. She stands with pride every morning and pledges allegiance to the American flag. In the hallway she's always on the right side, walking at the right pace. She does the right thing without being asked. She's the kind of kid any teacher would say is destined for success. She dreams of becoming a writer, or a teacher, or maybe an astrophysicist. She's in second grade and the future seems wide open. But I know something Gaby doesn't yet. If U.S. law remains unchanged, she will never become a school teacher or an astrophysicist. She is destined instead for life as a housecleaner, day laborer, or nanny. She will work where they hire people without papers. Gaby was brought to the U.S. by her parents before she started school, and under current law there's no path to legal residence or work permit for her.

For 10 long years there has been a piece of legislation waiting before congress that would change Gaby's situation. It offers a path to legalization for children who were brought here by their parents if they complete high school and either serve in the military or complete at least two years of college. It's called "the Dream Act." In the ten years the Dream Act has been before congress, over half-a-million undocumented young people have graduated from U.S. high schools only to find that they cannot legally work in this country. Sixty-five thousand more will graduate this year.

We are creating a class of people who are educated and could contribute to our society, but can work only outside the law. Many take menial jobs, but some turn to crime in order to survive. Our current treatment of these children is not sustainable. We need their talents, and they need our compassion. I would like to publicly thank David Price for his work to give children like Gaby a chance at the American Dream. He has championed the Dream Act in the House of Representatives, where it now finally has the support to pass.

In the Senate, however, it is still languishing. Neither of North Carolina's senators supports it. Both say they don't want to support people who have broken the law. But Gaby has not broken the law. Of course the sentiments of Senators Burr and Hagan have ancient precedent. Exodus 34 even presents God as saying, "I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents." But at the time of Israel's return from exile in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel confronted this thinking and condemned it. He says,

The LORD spoke to me and said, "What is this proverb people keep repeating in the land of Israel? 'The parents ate the sour grapes, but the children got the sour taste.' As surely as I am the living God, . . ., you will not repeat this proverb in Israel any more" (Ezekiel 18:1-3).

But in America we are still punishing the children for their parents' actions. Gaby needs for us to listen to Ezekiel. Please call your senators this week. Write to them. Email them. Tell them that we expect them not to punish the children for their parents' sins. Ask them to cosponsor the Dream Act. Gaby will thank you; our country will be stronger; and God will welcome your work for justice.