

As many of you know, I was scheduled to go on a medical mission to Haiti on January 14th. We were packed and ready to leave on when the earthquake struck and our trip had to be canceled.

About a year ago when I was convinced that I was called to go to Haiti, I had a conversation with Michael. He said I should preach when I returned and tell everyone about my trip. Shortly thereafter I had a dream in which I was right here saying, "I am not going to tell you what is wrong with Haiti, you can read about that. I am going to tell you what is right about Haiti." I was thinking of their great joy and great faith.

Well, things have changed. I didn't go on my trip. I have no pictures. It is Lent. And this is a different sermon. I am going to share some of Haiti's history with you.

But first, I want to look at the Gospel reading. Comments on today's Gospel often focus on Jesus as the son who is killed. This is appropriate since at this point in the story Jesus has made his final trip to Jerusalem and will soon be executed. Jesus is teaching in the temple and the chief priests and scribes have just questioned his authority.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable. "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while." Jesus' listeners would have gotten the reference, and while Luke did not make it explicit since his audience is Gentile, both Matthew and Mark did. Jesus echoed the poetry of chapter 5 of Isaiah which compares the people of Israel to a vineyard. It begins, "Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines." Unfortunately, in spite of all his attention, the vineyard yielded only wild grapes. And so the vineyard will be destroyed, made a waste. Then the writer says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for

justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry!” Then follows a series of six “woes”. Tradition holds that the leaders of the Israelites are the keepers of the vineyard and they are reproached for their injustice to the people. In the Gospel, the chief priests and scribes perceive that he told the parable against them.

So in the parable, the man planted a vineyard and let it to tenants. When the time came for the tenants to give the owner his portion of the fruit, the rent, they refused. Why did they refuse? Presumably the terms of their tenancy would have been worked out ahead of time. Was there an insufficient yield because they did not care for the vines as they should have? Or was there an abundant harvest and they wanted to keep the riches for themselves? The text does not tell us. Then, when the landowner sent his son to collect what was due to him, thinking they would respect him, “they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours’.”

Hold on to that while I tell you a little about Haiti. I read two histories of Haiti, but I found Paul Farmer’s book, *The Uses of Haiti*, to be the most helpful.

The place chosen by Christopher Columbus in 1492 for the first European settlement in the New World was called “ayiti,” meaning high country, by the people who lived there. That settlement did not last long, but in a few hundred years San Domingue, as it was called by the French colonists, was the wealthiest colony in the Americas. Roughly the size of Maryland, on the eve of the American Revolution San Domingue generated more income than all 13 colonies combined. At various points during the eighteenth century, it was the world’s leading producer of coffee, rum, cotton, and indigo. And in 1789 it supplied three-quarters of the world’s sugar. So the land was rich and bountiful. But all this wealth was produced by slave labor, kidnapped from West Africa, coming from dozens of different tribes, and speaking dozens of different

languages. In 1789 the colony held 40,000 white colonists, 28,000 mixed race and free blacks, and 452,000 slaves. In a slave owning world, the planters of San Domingue were notorious for their abuse of the slaves. So the slaves had nothing in common but their bondage and their hatred of their oppressors.

The slaves revolted. And in spite of the \$750,000 in military aid given to the colonists by the United States to protect their trading interests, the white colonists were defeated. On January 1, 1804, the Republic of Haiti was born, the second free republic in the Western Hemisphere and the first black one. Haiti remains the only country formed by formerly enslaved people who overthrew their colonial masters using military power. But they were not recognized as a free country by the European powers. Self –ruling blacks were the whites’ worst nightmare, a bad example for their slaves. In 1824, France did finally recognize Haitian sovereignty . In order to be recognized, Haiti paid 150 million francs and lower customs charges for France. The United States did not recognize Haitian sovereignty until after the Civil War. Though a pariah nation, the world continued to want the goods exported from Haiti and the trading economy continued.

Moving ahead a hundred years—when the Marines occupied Haiti in 1915, the US already had a strong military presence and extensive economic interests to protect. The United States proceeded to take complete political and administrative control over Haiti, as well as control of customs receipts. North American companies were given 266,000 acres of Haitian land. Thousands of peasants were dispossessed as a result. But even more desirable than the land was the cheap labor. Or free. The Marines instituted the involuntary conscription of laborers to build roads. And when we left Haiti, she was in even greater debt and more dependent upon exports, especially coffee. A New York

bank owned the national treasury. The wealth of Haiti came from the extraction of a surplus from the peasants and much of it was owed to foreign countries.

And finally, to move to more recent history, the United States fully supported the Duvalier dictatorships. After all, during the Cold War, even the most brutal dictator was better than a Communist. And both Papa Doc and Baby Doc encouraged US aid which was provided largely through the development of the assembly industry. Papa Doc welcomed Nelson Rockefeller in 1969 saying that Haiti could be a vast reservoir of manpower. Largely because of its cheap labor, extensive government repression, and denial of even minimal rights for the workers, Haiti was very attractive. But this industry did nothing to help the Haitian economy or the workers. And when the people were finally able to choose a leader for themselves, the elites of Haiti and the United States refused to support him. Jean-Bertrand Aristide questioned all their traditional privileges, especially the way they made money, through drugs, contraband, and abuse.

I could go on, but I think these examples are sufficient. The history of Haiti is a history of bad leadership and foreign exploitation. And how much are we, as a country and as individuals, responsible? How well have we tended the Lord's vineyard? Haiti is just one example. Everywhere in the world, the powerful oppress the weak in order to get rich, to take more than their fair share. This is a commentary on human nature.

So why? Why did the tenants want the vineyard so badly that they were willing to kill for it? Why do we take more than we need and then desire even more? Why are we so insecure when we have so much? The answer is not new. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Augustine put it this way, "Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised. . . . And man wants to praise you. . . . You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in

you.” Karl Rahner, a great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, called it our supernatural existential. I think of it this way. Inside each of us there is a space only God can fill. A hole. And it is not a small hole that can be easily filled. It is a big hole. So we try to fill it. We seek after comfort and security. We seek material pleasures. And when they do not satisfy we simply seek more of the same, more clothes, more cars, more houses. God created everything and everything is good. But nothing in this world can satisfy our longing. Our longing is not of this world. It is of and for God. For God to fill us, giving us peace and contentment. And when that God space is filled, we will be able to say with Paul, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

AMEN