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“Worst, Best, Most, and all the Rest”

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Philippians 4:8-13

This past week it has seemed that when the situation in Haiti cannot get worse, it does. Major aftershocks, just 8 days after the earthquake itself, a country in complete chaos, looting, now estimates of 200,000 dead, 1.5 million homeless, and difficulties in getting relief to people who need it. It is understandable that seasoned journalists such as CNNs Anderson Cooper break down on camera and almost seem on the verge of a total nervous breakdown. These are people who have endured far more than their share of suffering prior to the earthquake. Haiti gained its independence from France in 1804, becoming only the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, for half a century the United States refused to recognize Haiti, partly because it was founded by former slaves. Haiti has had a rough course ever since, and is now considered the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Four percent of the population controls 95% of its wealth. A significant number of Haitian children live as slaves in the households of the rich and wages are extremely low. Without a doubt, internal turmoil, dissension and a long history of dictatorships has made a nation without peace or prosperity.

The United Methodist Church has been sending Mission Teams there for many years to build schools, hospitals, work in orphanages and serve in a variety of ways. We opened a field office for our Committee on Relief there in 2005, and of course we will continue to be a presence there for many years to come. I am so thankful that our denomination does **not** agree with the sentiments of Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson who said the people of Haiti suffered because “...they swore a pact to the Devil” during their fight for independence from France 200 years ago. I’m trying to imagine a God who would bury schoolchildren under rubble to settle a centuries-old grudge. That’s not the God I know.

But how go on when they have lost absolutely everything? How does anyone regain purpose and meaning after going through something like that?

A recent article in the New York Times (“Haiti in Ink and Tears” by Madison Smartt Bell, Sunday, January 17, 2010) enlightened me about some of the unique aspects of Haitian culture and spirituality. Dr. Madison Bell is a professor who has written several books on Haiti, and he writes that the Haitians have “...an extraordinarily rich, fertile and (in spite of all of their historic suffering) optimistic culture. They have rich and distinctive music, art, and a very deep spiritual reservoir which has enabled them to embrace death, as they have all too often needed to do.”

The majority of the Haitian people practice a form of religion called Vodou, a Combination of tribal African and Roman Catholic spirituality. This is not Vodoo as you commonly think of it in terms of witchcraft, nor does it have anything to do with devil worship. Vodou teaches that the spiritual dimension of life is far more real than any other dimension. Every material thing has a spiritual dimension, including rocks. They believe that nobody ever really dies, but instead they undergo a translation of state. The spirits of the dead do not depart, but remain extremely close to the living. These spirits are invisible, but tangible, inhabiting a parallel universe with the living. These spirits can be found lurking just on the other side of any mirror you might gaze into, these spirits can be found beneath the surface of all water, and just behind the veil that divides us from our dreams. Mr. Bell contends that this rich and hopeful spirituality will sustain the Haitian people through this catastrophic experience, as it has throughout their troubled history. Such spiritual beliefs bring hope and meaning out of the worst circumstances imaginable.

The late Bishop Melvin Wheatley had a huge impact upon my life and faith journey. He was Bishop of our Rocky Mountain Conference for 12 years, during a very formative time in my life. He once preached a sermon based upon the formula that is printed on the front of your bulletins today: “Face the worst. Believe the best. Do the most. Leave the rest to God.” I have been thinking about those words as I pray for the people of Haiti. This formula offers an approach to life that can give us strength and peace even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Face the Worst

We need to be realistic about whatever it is we are facing. Even when something seems unbearable, it helps to see it completely and directly. This is so hard, because we are creatures of denial. We desperately want everything to be fine all the time. We hate to admit that life as we knew it is gone forever. We hate to admit that we might be addicted, or abusive, or in need of help. We hate to admit that our job is ending, or that our marriage is unfulfilling, that someone we love is dying.

Denial is very necessary stage of the grief process. At times we need to be in temporary denial before we can marshal the inner resources to deal with what we need to face. But eventually, we do need to face the worst. To accept reality and find a way to deal with it and move on.

There are many biblical examples of this, in both the Old and New Testaments, of people who found themselves in horrible and devastating circumstances, but the most impressive are from Jesus. He decides after just 3 short years of ministry to

go to Jerusalem and confront the religious authorities. Some Pharisees tell him that Herod will have him killed, but he says that he is going to Jerusalem with the full realization that he will be killed. He will face the worst. Then, on the last night of his earthly life he is in the Garden of Gethsemane, and praying all night long and tells God that if it is possible this destiny could pass him by. If things could be different, he would be relieved. But in the end he prays, “Not my will, but your will be done.” He is facing the worst. He would accept a way out, but knows that ultimately there is no other way. He trusts God to take care of his death, just as God has cared for his life.

Believe the Best

Now, there is a huge difference between **facing** the worst and **believing** the worst. We face the worst, but we **believe** the best. We choose to believe that somehow, good can come out of the worst of situations. The nation of Haiti will be rebuilt, and it will be stronger and better. You will adjust to your life without that loved one you miss so much. You will find strength and hope you did not know you had. You will learn lessons and move on, in time. A persistent truth of this life is that good things can come out of very, very bad things.

If we believe the best, very often we get it, for our beliefs do help to shape our destiny. Believing the best is not a naive, Pollyanna approach to life. It takes seriously the challenges, setbacks, and disappointments in life, but chooses to focus upon what can be done, rather than what cannot. It is seeing the potential and possibility that lies deep within every person and every situation.

There is a psychologist named Martin Seligman who has created a specialty out of researching “learned optimism” in an effort to help people with a positive approach to life. He writes about this in a book called “The Optimistic Child” detailing how we can change the voice inside our heads from one of critical negativity to one that is positive and encouraging. He contends that the messages we give ourselves from the earliest ages, become our approach to others and the world. Seligman’s research indicates that people who are optimists are far better equipped to deal with the suffering they encounter; they live longer and are healthier than their pessimistic counterparts.

Howard Schultz joined Starbucks Coffee Company in 1982 as Director of Marketing. He ran into obstacle after obstacle trying to pursue his dream of neighborhood coffee houses for building community. Hundreds of people told him that his idea of the neighborhood coffee bars would never work. They told him nobody would ever pay more than \$1.00 for a cup of coffee. At one point Schultz made individual one hour presentations to 241 potential investors and he was turned down 225 times. If you believe the worst instead of the best, at what point

would you throw in the towel? After 200 presentations or 220? And who ever would have dreamed people would pay \$4 for a cup of coffee? Schultz wrote: “So many times I have been told it could not be done. Again and again I had to use every ounce of perseverance and persuasion I could summon to make things happen. Life is a series of near misses. But much of what we ascribe to luck is really not luck at all. It is seizing the day and accepting responsibility for your future. It is seeing what other people do not see and pursuing a vision, no matter who tells you not to.”

Do The Most

To create the sort of future we want for ourselves and the world, we have to do the **most** that we possibly can in every situation. You will have fewer regrets at the end of your life if you knew that you gave the most to your relationships, your studies, your job, your faith. Did you do the most you could to raise healthy, happy responsible children? Did you do the most you could to be a supportive and faithful spouse? Did you do the most you could to be the sort of friend you would like to have yourself? Have you done the most you could on your job, for people in need, for your country, for God? Do the most you are able to do in every situation, and you will sleep better, look better, and live without regrets.

Last week we heard about Dr. Martin Luther King and the deep inner peace that he found during the worst days of the civil rights movement. I told you how during those years he got 40 death threats a day, many directed at his wife and 4 small children. But very early in the movement he nearly quit, as well. One night in January, 1956 he came home from a meeting, crawled into bed and the phone rang. A voice on the other end said, “If you are not out of town in 3 days we will blow out your brains and blow up your house.” He got up and went into the kitchen, made coffee and felt like he had to quit. He could not put his family through this. He put his head in his hands and prayed out loud, “God, I am weak and afraid. I do not know if I can do this. I have nothing left. I cannot do this alone.” He sat there crying for some time, but eventually he felt a deep inner conviction. A voice told him to stand up for truth. Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. He later said that he felt an inner calm he had never experienced before, and he rejoiced in a God who could transform “...the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope.” (*Let the Trumpet Sound*, by Stephen Oates, p. 88-89) From that day on he did the very most any human being could possibly do for the effort for full equality and justice for all people in America. Do the most.

Leave the Rest To God

Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we heard earlier is an infectiously joyful piece of writing. His exuberant spirit is contagious. His happiness has absolutely

nothing whatsoever to do with his external circumstances, because he wrote this letter from a jail cell, his work is under attack, and by now he has been traveling and evangelizing for over 20 years. He has to be tired and discouraged. But circumstances do not dampen his freedom and joy. He tells these friends to fill their minds with all things true, noble, genuine pleasant, beautiful and worthy of praise. He says that he doesn't need anything at all, because he has learned to be content in whatever circumstances he may find himself. He says he is as happy with little as with much, with much as with little.

Some people just know no matter what happens in life--joy or sorrow, life or death, there is something more going on that we cannot fully understand, and it is not ours to question or control.

Last Friday night's "Hope for Haiti" Telethon ended on a strangely joyful note. It was deeply moving to hear the stories and see the images, and listen to the mournful musicians. But the program concluded with Wyclef Jean, a native Haitian, who belted out the joyful song "Yele" to an island beat, musicians dancing all around him. He sang: "Earthquake, we see the earth shake, but the soul of the Haitian people will not break." It was a moment rich with promise and hope.

Etched over the some doorways of a cathedral of Milan are three inscriptions. Over one is carved a wreath of roses with the words: "All that **pleases** is but for a moment." Over the other is sculptured a cross with the words "All that **troubles** is but for a moment." The great central entrance in the main aisle has this truth inscribed: "**All that matters is eternal.**"

May we remember that as we continue our journey through this sad and strange, beautiful and mysterious world. Thanks Be To God. Amen.

(Thanks to Dr. Harvey Martz for some of the ideas in this sermon)