

FOR THE COMMON GOOD
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January 17, 2010
Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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This morning my friend Tracy Boyer who died this past Thursday is on my mind. The people of Haiti are also very much on mind as well as the budget crunch our Session faced Thursday evening. Tracy would be pleased with the sermon this morning because he once told me—after I told him how much I disliked talking about church finances in a sermon—that every sermon he preached was about stewardship in one way or another. So here goes. A sermon dedicated to Tracy. I begin with Haiti and end with our own financial predicament with a passing reference to the popular movie *Avatar* just for kicks. First the lesson.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services [or, ministries], but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues [or, languages], to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. **1 Corinthians 12:4-11***

This morning Haiti is heavy on our mind. We are horrified at the devastation wrecked upon that poorest of nations—its flimsy structures and infrastructure broken, its corpses piled and piling higher, its meager resources no match for the cries for help.

This morning we have an opportunity to contribute to the relief and rebuilding of that nation. There are, as you know, hundreds of ways to reach out to the people of Haiti. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) is one. PDA has a long and proven record of effective aid.

No one agency or fund can do it all. At times like this individuals, humanitarian agencies, national governments, NGOs and churches offer their gifts, gifts entrusted by the Spirit for the common good. Our own Rob Northrup has a long and personal relationship with Albert Schweitzer Hospital there. Rotary of Shepherdstown is channeling gifts to that hospital through him.

Once again we are amazed and grateful at the way people mobilize quickly, generously, compassionately in the wake of a disaster. We shouldn't be surprised. We've seen it time and time again: after 911, after Katrina, after the Asian tsunami, and in the midst of countless famines. We've seen human and material resources orchestrated for the common good. Of course, not all help is helpful. So we must be smart.

We now know that over time humanitarian aid can inadvertently undermine local initiative and local economies and thrust poor nations into dependency and reoccurring, avoidable famines. It's not enough to be compassionate—although that's an excellent start. We must also be smart. Knowledge is a good thing. Wisdom is even better.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit for the common good.

I don't know much about other humanitarian programs but I know about the PDA and even more about the Presbyterian Church's approach to social problems. For hundreds

of years Presbyterian mission efforts have focused on three things: conversion of the heart, healing of the body, and education of the mind. Presbyterians founded nearly a hundred colleges and universities in this country and dozens more in other countries. But even education without a heart converted to love won't do much good.

In various and sundries ways in this country and around the world the Presbyterian church proclaims and embodies Christ's spirit of love in order to turn hearts of stone into hearts of love—love that keeps enlarging the definition of the common good from me and my family, from me and my tribe, to my neighbor, my society, my nation and ultimately to the world. If we stop at self, family, tribe, or our nation—to put it bluntly—we haven't grown up, we have not fully matured in Christ.

Love is a gift given to each and everyone. Love is a gift but cultivation of that gift takes work.

It takes a community to cultivate love. And that in part is what this church does. Week after week, year after year, generation after generation, inch by inch, pew by pew, household by household we cultivate a garden of love. It's no accident that you will respond generously for Haiti this morning. And it's no accident that the Presbyterian church has structures and partners in place to deliver immediate aid and structures to tend the sick and structures to repair and rebuild and structures to educate the mind.

It's no accident. It takes time, money, passion and discipline.

Year after year Presbyterians have contributed their gifts—time, talent and treasure—to create and sustain such institutions, just as our predecessors in this church have done generation after generation since 1743 to sustain the work and witness of this one, small church.

This year, however, our financial structure is in jeopardy, in part because of the larger economy but mainly because some of our members are either complacent or ignorant; complacent, thinking others will keep things going for them; or ignorant, thinking a few dollars now and then is enough. Well, it's not.

I am glad and grateful that much of our work and witness does not depend on money. But much does. That's a plain and simple fact in these times.

I know some of you are giving all you possibly can and you've told me so. Still, I'm guessing with a congregation of some 200 households some could give \$5-10 more a week and some who are giving little or nothing could start. Membership in a covenant community comes with certain obligations not all of which are financial but that is certainly one.

Our financial structure is shaky.

This past Thursday the Session cut nearly \$26,000 from our projected spending for this year and then provisionally approved a budget of \$314,000. Our anticipated income is \$300,000. So there's a built in deficit, a "faith portion" of \$14,000. Last year's budget had a \$13,000 deficit and all of that was made up by a year-end surge in giving. A church such as ours with so many households and most of us relatively well-off should not depend on desperate, year-end appeals.

Nearly every other aspect of our structure is sound. Only our financial structure is shaky but it could have a ripple effect. No, this building is not going to collapse overnight. No, our work and witness in this community will not disappear overnight. But without more sustained support our material and immaterial structures are in jeopardy. I believe we can repair and restore things, including those provisional cuts in our mission support.

Each of us has been entrusted with certain gifts and in some cases that means some of us

have financial resources greater than others. Those gifts are from the Spirit for the common good.

But, just what is the common good? It all depends on how large you define your community.

The Apostle's point in today's lesson is that *who* we are and *what* we have is meant for the common good and not for self-indulgence, comfort, or sheer survival. The same Spirit that indwells the natural world is the same spirit that has brought us into life, into a vast, wondrous, and complicated web of life both natural and human.

We now know from ecology that for the whole to thrive individual cells and systems must be healthy. A tree cannot survive for long without an enormous web of life to support to it. And not much else will survive if trees go extinct.

James Cameron's spectacular 3D movie *Avatar* conveys that message powerfully before reverting to the barbarian myth of redemptive violence as if Christ had lived and died in vain. Cameron flirts with radical love and then retreats like a coward. Nevertheless, his movie is a lot of fun if viewed as a cartoon for adults.

What is the common good? It all depends.

If the work and witness of this church falters the spiritual ecology of Shepherdstown and the region will suffer. It won't be catastrophic but it will matter.

Who will be what we are? Who will foster wholesome and holy attitudes of tolerance and courage in our children and our youth if we don't? Who will welcome those whom society and other churches scorn and reject? When a member of this parish or the larger community dies, who will provide a beautiful sanctuary, an organ and an organist, pastoral care, a fellowship hall and hospitality as we do? Who will rescue the Christian tradition from barbarian myths and let it creatively evolve?

This kind of church doesn't just happen by luck or magic. It's made possible by an institution created, cultivated and sustained over many generations by many hands and many gifts both financial and otherwise.

I realize that SPC is but one tiny cell in the larger Presbyterian Church. But it's our duty to be as healthy, vibrant and wholesome as possible. The Presbyterian Church itself is but one small cell in the worldwide body of Jesus Christ. But it's our duty to be as healthy, vibrant and wholesome as possible. Christianity is but one religious community among many religious and secular communities working for the common good. But it's our duty to be healthy, vibrant and wholesome. Each cell and species affects the whole.

The earthquake in Haiti is tragic but it is also another learning moment. Earthquakes and other natural disasters expose the power of the earth and the power of the human heart for good and evil. This is an apocalyptic moment, a moment of revelation. Disasters have a way of revealing the human predicament.

We are vulnerable to powerful forces. We can't control everything. In fact we can't control much. We can't prevent natural disasters but we can mitigate their impact. Knowledge is a big help. And I've just given you some knowledge about your church and its structure. I can give you information; but I can't change your heart or your behavior.

Earthquakes aren't the only things that threaten and shake communities. Insidious forces prowl our own society and culture and will turn our hearts into stone if we let them. Our children and youth are extremely vulnerable. To be sure, we can't eliminate those forces. But we can build a community of faith and love that resists those destructive forces by cultivating hearts of love, courage and wisdom.

We have a choice. We can coast on the work of our predecessors and others; or we can dig in and dig deep and keep building a strong and vibrant community of love.