

Lent4/ 3/30/14

Today's Gospel story of the healing of a blind beggar and the firestorm of controversy that it stirred up made for some very rich reflection this week, as I prepared to talk this morning. Many details caught my imagination, but one that stays in my heart is the method of healing Jesus employs. First of all, the drama is heightened by this detail - as an audience member, I was imploring, "No! Don't do it! You know you're making it worse! It's the Sabbath!!" After all, this is Jesus - he heals with just a word, even when the sick or dying person isn't there - he heals at a distance. So why this messy, intimate, Sabbath forbidden act of getting down, close enough to the ground to spit in the dirt, make a paste, and then spreading it on the blind man's eyes? I have read that there is evidence of this kind of practice among other ancient healers. But the writer of this Gospel isn't known for gratuitous historical details like that - if he painted it into this picture, I think it was for a good reason - and one I can think of is that it recalls the act of creation, when God formed Adam out of the clay. (James Weldon Johnson version, 1927, Creation)

Putting that aside for a minute, the major emphasis in this story is seeing - who sees, who doesn't see - and it is into that context that I would like to share with you about my experience of Haiti.

About three months ago, as you may remember, I was able to travel to Haiti with your support, where I participated for one week in the work of Midwives for Haiti, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 2006 by a nurse-midwife from Virginia named Nadine Brunk, who had been there as part of a Medical team and observed the conditions that give Haiti the distinction of having the highest Maternal-infant mortality rate in the Western hemisphere.

My experience of Haiti really began about 35 years ago, when I read somewhere that it is one of the poorest countries in the world - it being right in our own hemisphere made that reality the more scandalous. It is an island nation that exists because of a slave rebellion in the 1790s, and it has been independent since 1804. What we know of it in the US is mostly from news coverage of the various disasters that have befallen it in the last generation since the dawn of 24-hour news coverage:

- Hurricanes and their aftermath of homelessness and cholera, sweeping through if not every season then with devastating regularity.
- American and UN occupations ostensibly to quell unrest & stop the flow of refugees, but usually to prop up whatever form of government best serves US corporate interests.
- The earthquake of January 12, 2010 that leveled the capital killed 316,000 and left millions homeless.

Less newsy, but more devastating in actuality was the perinatal mortality rate of 650/100,000. (That number is made up of the combined total of maternal and infant deaths during pregnancy and through the first month after birth.) That ratio, in a population of 10 million, amounts to 650,000 deaths a year, year after year. This was what Nadine Brunk sought to remedy when she founded Midwives for Haiti. An ongoing solution to a chronic problem would require a different model than the one or two-week medical mission trips she had participated in before in the wake of various disasters. According to the World Health Organization, the presence of a skilled birth attendant is the single most significant intervention to bring about a reduction in that perinatal mortality rate. When a woman dies, a void is left behind: her children are left vulnerable, her family suffers and sometimes disintegrates, and her contribution to her community is lost. So, a school for midwives was established, and with it a mechanism for other nurses, midwives, physicians and sometimes their families, to participate in a work that would save lives and contribute to the strengthening of a nation.

I found out about Midwives for Haiti through a student nurse-midwife that I had a few years ago, and knew it was the way I would finally get to Haiti, but still, it took a friend offering to help me raise the money for the trip that got me to commit and set a date to go. I finally went, the second week of January this year – and it has taken me about three months now to be able to say much of anything about it.

This is where the idea of seeing versus blindness in today's Gospel helped me to understand what had kept me from understanding my experience there. I had gone expecting it to help me figure out what to do with the rest of my life, or at least to give me a game plan for my looming retirement. In other words I had expectations that blinded me to the present moment. Similar to the disciples, who could only understand the beggar's blindness as a result of sin, or the Pharisees who could not see the action of God right under their noses because Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker, I missed some of the experience that I did have because I was expecting it to be something else. So I approached the journal that I kept in Haiti as another sacred text, and just let the experiences come back to me –

So I simply share some of what I saw, without adding any interpretation or expectation onto it:

- Waking up on January 5th, after a long day of travel on the 4th, I smell petrol fumes, and since 7:15, I hear music from the tiny barber shop across the road. There is dust. Dry season dust stirred up by the motor taxis that go by every minute or so, also a few horses, donkeys, a tiny burro, and many many many goats.
- Later that day: we tour the Hospital Ste-Therese in Hinche, where we will work the rest of the week. It is large, many wards in free-standing buildings open to air. A large cholera tent in an area separate from the main cluster of buildings. That main cluster includes the maternity areas – wards for women hospitalized before, during, and after birth, as well as space for women in hospital due to pregnancy complications. About 35 beds in all, two staff midwives taking care of all the patients with the help of patients' families, who also provide the meals and the bedding.
- The roads: outside the capital, "paving" consists of a mixture of rocks and cement, and the ride is still pretty bumpy. Many areas are washed out, so there are lots of potholes and gullies. The motorcycle-

taxi drivers weave in and out around these features, so we hold on tightly for the five minute ride to the hospital and back each day. When walking these same streets, at closer range and slower pace, I notice remnants of older, brick pavement that have survived along the edges of the road, probably decades old. This was a very different country at one time, they seem to imply. I wish these roads could speak.

- Mobile Clinics are held every 2 – 4 weeks at 15 sites around the region; on my day I go to one of the closer ones, about 45 minutes away. We arrive by Jeep with staff & supplies, and set up the 12' x 12' wooden structure while women start arriving, most on foot, a few on the back of motorbike taxis. I started out taking blood pressures as women waited on the porch for the clinic to begin. Of the 6 that I took, 3 were >140/90 (high enough to get you twice-a-week visits in our world) Elevated blood pressure is one of the cardinal signs of pre-eclampsia, which accounts for 50% of the maternal deaths in Haiti.

- One more vignette – After our morning with students at the hospital one day, I and three other volunteers go over to a feeding center operated by the Missionaries of Charity. Under a large portrait of Mother Teresa in a room of about 12 children in little cribs, I pick up a fairly withdrawn little boy, perhaps 2 or 3 years old – it is hard to tell in these nutritionally deprived kids, because of their stunted growth. His hair had mostly fallen out, replaced by reddish fuzz, big belly, tiny arms and legs but swollen feet – I recognize the classic signs of protein deficiency. We have come to help with the afternoon feeding. He never really woke up totally but ate every bit of a large bowl of cereal-like protein supplement that I spoon-fed him - kind of the consistency of grits – he clung to me then and didn't want to be put back in his little bed, hungry for touch as much as food. I walked him around and looked out the windows for as long as I could before going to the next child.

An ending thought is difficult to come up with here; there is no way to conclude this story neatly. Its edges are raw in me and it perhaps leaves all of us uneasy.

That one detail in the Gospel today that recalls creation – the mud – that is helpful to me right now. Blindness, acknowledged, may be the thing that connects us to the creative action of God. The mud – well, it's a curious detail, and it sure got Jesus in a peck of trouble. Washing it off, the man born blind was born again, sighted, new. May we have the grace to say we do not see, so that every experience can be recognized as the new creation that it is. Amen