

The Balance
First Reading - Luke 16:19-31
Second Reading - Amos 8:4-8

Until 2007, my only footprint outside of the United States was a brief fishing trip across the border into Canada, and thus the only language challenge was understanding that they ate paasta and drove Maazdas. So, my first full-on international adventure was an excursion to Haiti. International travel for a first-timer is a daunting idea in itself, but the notion of traveling to the poorest country in the western hemisphere without knowing the language was downright intimidating to this unpolished pastor of the Piedmont. When someone sought to calm my anxieties, saying that the language was just a form of French, I thought — *And ... this is helpful ... how?*

As the plane descended into its landing pattern over the city of Port Au Prince, I heard a Haitian man behind me, who in looking out the window, said to his seat mate that the area below us, Citi de Soleil, was not a neighborhood to venture into. That warning sounds almost quaint today as the whole city, and essentially the whole country, has been enveloped by violent and unprecedented chaos.

After landing and making our way through customs, we headed toward the exit in order to get on the bus that would take us to Bayonnais. And travel veterans will tell you that nothing prepares you for the scene outside the Toussaint Louverture International Airport. There we were greeted by thousands of eyes focused directly on us, as if we were a float in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Along the sidewalk, there were hundreds of young men shouting to us and reaching for the handles of our bags in the hope of a tip that would mean little to us, but would possibly feed them for a week. A member of our church who lived in Manhattan spoke of putting on the facial and brain armor necessary to navigate the chaotic city sidewalks, and there at the airport in Port au Prince, walking to the bus, we were told to have that kind of armor on.

The entreaties to carry our luggage were becoming more intense and aggressive, a few of the men actually grabbing at me and my bags, unwilling to take no for an answer. Yet, in that same moment, out of the corner of my eye, a truck pulled right beside me and the driver started shouting at the men around me. And all I heard was this commanding loud voice shouting at the men around me in that French/Creole patois of the land. Of course, I

was clueless, but what I heard was — *Creole, Creole, Creole, He's a Man of God, Creole, Creole, Creole.*

Actionnel, that was probably the first, and the last time I'll ever have someone identify me as *a man of God*. Yet, I'll tell you this, those guys backed off ... and in that moment I knew that I was dealing with a person of towering character and inviolable purpose, who, energized and sustained by the Holy Spirit of our Lord, embodies the calling of The Greatest Commandment, loving and serving God and neighbor in a place where hope struggles for oxygen to breathe.

Did you know that Haiti is the only country to be established by a slave revolt and is the most populous country in the Caribbean. Haiti's history offers a complicated narrative of governmental instability, a failed record of outside intervention or exploitation, and a tragic record of natural disasters. The hurricanes of 2008 destroyed 70% of Haiti's crops. Hurricane Matthew in 2016 displaced over 175,000 residents, and the cataclysmic earthquake of 2010 killed an estimated 300,000 people, and displaced 1.5 million people.

A member of our 2007 group had served in extensive missions work in Latin America, living for an extended period in the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and knowing how desperate life was in that nation, he said that he joined our group in part to see how any country could possibly be poorer. He later indicated that he was blown away by the significant difference in poverty between #2 and #1.

In 2024, 36.2% of the population was living on less than \$2.15 per day, and over 60 percent live below the general poverty line. According to the United Nations Development Program, *The intensity of deprivations in Haiti, which is the average deprivation score among people living in multidimensional poverty (education, healthcare, standard of living), is 48.4 percent.* And now, with the collapse of governance and the free-wheeling reign of terror imposed by organized gangs, even obtaining food at all is a perilous and sometimes pointless pursuit, because between 50-85% of food must be imported. Security, inflation, reduced agriculture, and the closing of markets mean that even if you have access to purchase supplies, the cost has skyrocketed — Actionnel shared the following with me -

As of September 2025 (prices in goudes)

Rice: 1000 to 4950

Coca-Cola: 50 to 125

Beans: 200 to 1200

Soap for Laundry: 200 to 3250

Cooking oil : 200 to 1200

Fuel: 125 to 750

Yet, in the midst of this madness, consider Rose-Sentia, maybe 11 years old, lives with her sister, likes to play hide and seek. Hopes one day to be a nurse. Consider Mavensky, perhaps 6 years old. Stands proudly, shoulders back, his chest out, smiling. He lives with his parents. Mavensky enjoys playing soccer on a field laid out years ago by youth from SMPC. He hopes to be a teacher.

Consider a young kid, inquisitive mind, infectious smile, irrepressible sense of humor, randomly selected by our own Helen Hunter to sponsor, unaware of the vision and calling he had to one day start a church and a school; unaware that one day a building on that yet to be constructed campus would bear her name; unaware that the student's vision would become a reality borne out on four campuses with 2300 students enrolled.

Don't tell me that sponsoring a student and investing in a child's education doesn't bear fruit. Just ask David and Judy Nichols. A child they sponsored long ago dreamed of becoming a doctor (a formidable dream in an area with no accessible healthcare at the time). It was a dream David

and Judy supported, and in the coming days they will welcome as their guest, Dr. Faustin Charles, as he returns to Haiti from Paris where he just completed a fellowship in thoracic surgery. Upon his return, Faustin will be the only thoracic surgeon in the entire country of Haiti.

OFCB ministries, sustained by your support, prayers, and sponsorships has not only provided a refuge in a chaotic, distressed, and violent land, but stands a testament to the reality that thoughts and prayers, when given hands and feet grant progress, substance, and hope even when resisted or rejected by powers, principalities, or a morass of anarchy.

These are strange and perilous times across the globe and in our own land. I did not foresee when I began in church ministry that at this point near the end of my ministry, there would be such a large segment of the Christian population celebrating and applauding a rejection of empathy, an imposition of cruelty, and a loathing and shaming of those whom Christ called neighbor.

Believing we are called as a people to lean into empathy and compassion, it seems increasingly socially acceptable to call our efforts, and the things we prioritize, evil. I am deeply troubled when I hear people

lustily singing Jesus' praise, and then condemning the people Christ came to embrace; the very ones God has called believers to lift up.

Of course, this is not new, for these issues have always plagued God's people: The lure of power, prosperity, and exclusivity versus the call to compassion, mercy, inclusion, and equality. Just ask Amos. Oh he'll tell us. Amos has strong words for any who would forsake compassion's call while still singing God's praise. *"Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land ... The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it,"*

David's Israel had long before broken in two — Israel claimed the North and Judah claimed the South. Amos was raised in the South and grew to make his living as a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore fig trees, yet God called upon Amos to be a prophet in the north, in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. That you don't find many babies named Jeroboam today may tell you something about this king's reputation in the line of Israel's kings. Oh, there was economic success for a select few, but Jeroboam's markets were both insult and injury to the poor and disenfranchised.

Amos was called to expose the hypocrisy of the powers and the parishioners, praising God while exploiting their vulnerable neighbors. In Amos 2, Amos condemns those *“who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth.”* In Amos 4, the prophet declares those *“who oppress the poor, who crush the needy ... The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks...”* And in our text today, Amos offers specific details about how greed is inevitably exploitative of the vulnerable.

Amos begins here outing the merchants who participate in, and yet resent, the demands of Sabbath and faith observance — *“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?’”*

Many here don’t have to imagine such an image, because you’ve lived it. Remember the days of the blue laws when stores were not allowed to open on Sundays? In the pews you would hear the sound of teeth gnashing and grumbling as business owners were grieving lost time and lost income — *“We could make a killing on a day like this if we could open.”* Sundays meant no shopping, no profit, and resentment-spiced worship. They

apparently hadn't been listening to the reading of the Torah, because as soon as the Sabbath ended, they were plying their trade using practices that were the opposite Scripture's teachings. Amos mocks those for whom profit is more important than propriety and fairness — *“We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.”*

An ephah is a unit of dry measure, like a peck or a bushel. A shekel is a basic unit of weight. Despite being unlawful according to Mosaic law, it was common for crafty merchants to own two different sets of weights and measures for the balances they used at the point of purchase. In selling grain to the poor, merchants used alternate measures and weights so that at purchase, the buyer received less than an ephah and paid for more than an ephah. Possibly you have heard of the term — tipping the scales.

This week, our own Mrna Dibble, herself a Haiti veteran, showed me a gan cheng, a traditional Chinese balance/scale. When living in Hong Kong, Mrna learned what the locals had long understood. When you enter a market and you see one of these sitting on the counter, you know you are going to be cheated. You just don't know by how much.

“We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.” Amos declares the Lord’s impatience with those who say their prayers while exploiting their neighbors. *“The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it.”*

Do we understand what portends when avarice, fraud, malevolence, and blame supplant Moses’ commands and Jesus’ teachings? Do we know the consequences of mocking empathy, strangling compassion, hating the enemy, and shunning the neighbor? The children are telling us — from the hills of Bayonnais to the streets of Kiev and Gaza City; from tented detention centers to underfunded schools; from the shelters uptown to the left behind small towns stretching out from sea to shining sea; from the echoes out of Newtown, Columbine, Parkland, Uvalde, and Blacksburg.

Do we hear them? Will we pay heed to their voices amidst the cacophony of blame as enmity steps on the neck of empathy? The children of Bayonnais are not giving up. They’re going to school. Returning graduates are showing them — There are pathways to becoming a nurse, a

teacher, an engineer, a community builder, a leader. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.” Perhaps we should be following them.

EWO is the Haitian Creole word for hero, and is the chosen name of the organization that coordinates the student sponsorship program for the children of Bayonnais and beyond. As I consider present circumstances in our culture and around our world, the easy path is despair and cynicism, but perhaps we should take note of EWO’s mission, adapting it to our own environment. On EWO’s website, it is stated — *WE BELIEVE THE NEXT GENERATION WILL SAVE HAITI. It is our mission to empower the next generation of Haiti to break the cycle.*

May we support that effort. And may we adapt that ethos to the context of our own troubled environment. May it be our mission to empower the next generation to break the cycle of our generation’s iniquities. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, may the children bring to fulfillment Amos’ central vision — “[*That*] justice [*may*] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Amen