

This has been a difficult week. A tragedy of epic proportion has struck Haiti – a country in our own backyard where poverty had already reduced life to a daily struggle for existence for most of its people. The vast majority of Haitians live on less than two dollars a day. In the best of times it is the poorest country in the Western world with a fragile food supply – without the most basic things that you and I take for granted.

You've seen the pictures on the front pages of newspapers and seen the stories on television. It now appears that perhaps as many as 200,000 people have been killed by last Thursday's earthquake. No one knows how many will perish from the aftermath of starvation and disease. The numbers are staggering – too large to be grasped, really. It is the pictures that bring it home. Every one of the massive numbers – whatever the count turns out to be – is an individual, a human being with family and loves ones. Each death is a tragedy. It is heart breaking. It is too much to think about for too long.

A day or two after the earthquake Pat Robertson said on some television show that it was an act of God delivered upon Haiti because the people of Haiti has entered into a pact with the devil in the 18th century, more than two hundred years ago. I won't try to guess at what Pat Robertson's motivations are, but the cruelty of such a statement is beyond comprehension. It paints a picture of a monster God and dehumanizes the enormous human suffering that is breaking the hearts and the lives of tens of thousands of people.

It is tempting to dismiss such statements as nothing more than the ridiculous ravings of the religious fringe in this country. But people hear. People listen. People send in their money. It is dressed in the clothing of Christianity.

It is not an act of God. We – you and I – need to say that. The God that has touched my life and filled my heart is a God of love and compassion, not a God of vengeance. We need to say that. We need to name names. The face of Christ is to be found in the faces of the suffering. The face of Christ is to be found in the outpouring of compassion. We need to say that.

And then, a day or two later, talk radio host, Rush Limbaugh, said that President Obama's response was nothing more than a political move to win favor with what he call, "lighter and darker skinned Americans." "Everything this president sees," he said, "is a political opportunity, including Haiti, and he will use it to brunish his credential with minorities in this country and around the world." And then he said in a comment about financial assistance: "We've already donated to Haiti: it's called the U.S. income tax."

I can't read Rush Limbaugh's mind; I can't see into his heart. But at face value the statements are blatantly racist. They just cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. It has nothing to do with your particular politics. The desperation of three million people is not an opportunity to promote anybody's agenda. That needs to be said. It doesn't matter whether the people are black or white or something else. It doesn't matter who is President of the United States or which political party is in power. What matters is that there is so much pain, so much suffering. That simply has to be said.

There is, of course, another side. There is another story that gives us cause to be proud. It is the bigger story though it may not get told with as much fanfare because it isn't so confrontational or sensational.

It is the story of the response of the American people and the people of the world. As of Friday, ten million dollars had been raised just by people texting on their cell phones at ten dollars a text. The multi-ethnic center of Houston has been swamped with food and clothing to the point where they had to stop accepting donations. Countries all over the world have stepped forward.

The picture on yesterday's news was one of President Bush and President Clinton standing on either side of President Obama bringing the resources of the American people to respond in whatever way we can. That is something of which we can all be proud. And that needs to be said to.

God does not rain disaster on the heads of people – many of whom are children. But God does call all of us to love and to compassion.

"..... I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him.

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsom and jetsom in the river of life unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

..... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

.....I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land.

Those are some excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964. The language is now dated a bit, but the words are still powerful. Tomorrow, of course, is a holiday honoring his memory, and he now has a date on the Episcopal Church's liturgical calendar.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was not perfect. Who among us is? He was flawed as we all are. If you are as old as I am and grew up on the South as I did, you remember that there were days of tension and confusion as the world shifted almost overnight and would never be the same again.

The thing that was different about Martin Luther King, Jr. was that he had a vision, he had a dream. In all the chaos and turmoil, he had a vision of a world different from the world around him.

We have a dream as well. We, too, have a vision. It is called the Kingdom of God. It isn't enough to just dream it or hope for it even pray for it. We have to live it. We have to speak it. We have to spread it.

Amen.

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Dean