

World Communion Sunday
October 1, 2006
James 5:13 – 20
“At the Table”
Rev. Carol Anne Strawbridge

It was a right turn into the hills of South Africa. I had read about the countryside that was unfolding before my eyes in Alan Payton’s novel Cry the Beloved Country. The book was written in 1948. Much has happened in South Africa since that time, but from my seat, it seemed as if the land still retained the beauty, echoed the respect, and whispered the challenges that Payton had portrayed in his novel. It was as if I was taking a right turn into the book itself. I was confident that it was going to be a right turn into a remarkable travel journey. I didn’t realized it, however, that it was going to be a right turn into a remarkable faith journey. Among many things, this particular right turn meant the end of paved roads and the beginning of dirt roads. For six hours we would bounced through the South African countryside. My seven travel companions and I were half way through our two week trip. We had already heard many stories, met countless people, photographed scores of landscapes, and traversed the countryside in numerous modes of transportation. On this particular day, we were navigating the dirt road in a mini-bus.

The deep ruts in the road were jarring, to say the least, however, they were certainly more manageable than the jarring stories we had heard over the last week. For instance, it was hard for me to imagine that 30 to 50 percent of the population in any country in the twenty-first century was dying of disease, any disease – but that is exactly what is happening in South Africa due to HIV/AIDS pandemic! My South African trip had been arranged by the United Church of Christ – our purpose was to explore the ways in which the church was addressing this devastating pandemic. I had approached the trip academically - reading everything from magazines to books to Google search results on the subject of HIV/AIDS/South Africa. I boarded the plane in Rochester deceiving myself that I was ready to experience first hand the challenges presented by South AfricanI was wrong.

On this day, I was deep in thought as I bounced around the dirt road, stared out the window of mini-bus, and welcomed the personal reflection time – despite the occasional interruption of a jolt. The dirt

road was surely not designed for mini-buses – or perhaps the bus was not designed for dirt roads. Whichever, the paved road was a distant memory and I was surrounded by breathtaking beauty. As we passed by the intriguing round stucco homes of South African families, the grief-stricken stories I had heard of families devastated by HIV/AIDS rang in my ears – grandmothers who had buried their own children, now raising their grandchildren - women who had been faithful to unfaithful husbands, now fighting for their own lives - children who were health care providers for their own parents, now trying to avoid becoming one of the one million orphans of the country. The many orphaned children were a constant reminder of the far reaching tragedy of HIV/AIDS. These children filled the streets and scavenged food and shelter wherever it could be found. I had heard enough and learned enough to know that HIV was in one way or another, a sorrowful family dynamic that had most likely infiltrated all of the picturesque round houses we were passing – despite their picture post card appearance.

The bus slowed down, we were at our first destination – It was Rosey's small health clinic. Rosie was a petit 74 year old woman. She spent her days transporting, on her head, a six liter bucket of soup to the homes of the sick – sometimes walking as much as twenty miles. She expressed her frustration at the availability of medicine yet the unavailability of means to get it to the people who needed it – men, woman, teenagers, children, even babies. She dreamed of building a hospice where folks could be properly cared for as they died and medicine could be distributed to those who dared to imagine a future. When we asked how we could help, she simply said: Tell our story – spread the word - pray for us. It was a request we had heard over and over again: Tell our story, spread the word, pray for us.

How similar these words were to the mandate of James in the Second Reading today – “Are any among you sick? They should call the leaders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.” Rosey's faith was at the basis of all she did and all she envisioned. Did she know this line of scripture – I don't know – it's not like the book of James is quoted left and right – but I do know she truly lived it. As a lay leader in the Christian church, she heard the cries of the sick and was responding. We left Rosie standing in front of her modest clinic smiling and waving good-bye. .

Our journey continued up the mountain. The road became steeper, the drop-off more severe, and my stomach more nervous. Finally we arrived at our ultimate destination. It was a small church – on top of a hill - a gray building adorned with a cross. We found empty seats on the rough hewn benches and waited as church members joined us. It was humbling to be in the midst of Christian brothers and sisters whose deep faith was not shaken by extreme poverty and overwhelming grief. Their songs, prayers, and scripture again echoed the words of James, “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.” Did they know this rather obscure verse from James? I don’t know, but they certainly knew how to come to God in prayer and sing songs of praise. And we did all of this as we came to the Lord’s Table together to share the sacrament of Communion in this small church embraced by the hills of South Africa and the love of God.

James letter was to Jewish Christians who were in his words “scattered among the nations.” Yet, despite their scattered living situation - or maybe because of their scattered living situation - James gives his friends good solid advice for living in Christian community: prayer, caring, confessing, forgiving, trusting, praising. Christian community is not about place and time in the world. Instead, it is a way of being in the world. As we came to the Lord’s Table in this remote South African United Church of Christ, we came as family members - as God’s family. Sisters and brothers in community, beyond geographical boundaries, beyond cultures, beyond races, beyond gender, beyond generations, beyond what was, what is, and what will be – and we celebrated our unity at our family table – God’s table. Indeed, in the same way that we will on this World Communion Sunday.

What does it mean to live in Christian community? For one thing, it means listening the cries and the calls for help from all of God’s children - from the clinics in South Africa to the homeless in our own city - but it means more than just listening. It means responding, as we do so well at GPC. Our congregation pledges seventeen percent of our budget to mission. Those dollars directly touch the lives of those as far away as Africa and as close to home at St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality. This year alone, mission work group have traveled to Jamaica, New York City, New Orleans, and into the city of Rochester. Living in Christian community means

continuing to put our faith into action. It means praying for our brothers and sisters while we reach out to them.

Well, we left the church, walked to the bus and headed down the mountain – somehow the bumps just didn't seem so bad as we left the mountaintop. Yes, we had definitely made a right turn.

Amen