



## The Central Pulpit

Central Presbyterian Church | Atlanta, Georgia

### A Parent's Love

Text: John 17:20-26

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Some spoke Creole. Some spoke French. Some spoke English with accents ranging from Ohio to the deep South. The bishop of the Episcopal Church in Haiti was in full vestments, holding his shepherd's crook and wearing his impressive mitre. Father Vil had orchestrated the dedication service, including a last minute, midnight, four-hour, trip to the village of Trou Jacques over the roughest rocky roads you can imagine, to make sure all was ready for the dedication on Sunday.

Hundreds of Haitians, along with those of us from the U.S., sang our way to the front of the church that was adorned with balloons and a red ribbon across the entrance. If you haven't seen and heard this spectacular procession, go to Central's Facebook page and be inspired.

Young women were in sparkling white wedding-like dresses, preparing for baptism and confirmation, while young men wore black slacks, a white shirt, sporting black bow ties. We processed behind the bishop to the entrance of the church built by Haitians in memory of two deceased Central members, Howard and Margaret Montgomery.

So many obvious things divided those of us walking in that procession. Some had credit cards, a passport, and cash in their pockets. Some will never have a credit card or a passport and rarely have cash in any pocket. Some had traveled across the globe on business and for pleasure. Most had never left the village of Trou Jacques or travelled off the island of La Gonave. Many spent the majority of each day in search of clean water, while others find clean water whenever they turn on the tap.

As the bishop cut the ribbon and the church filled to overflowing with curious faces peering through every window and door, our differences started to seem far less significant. As some of us sang familiar hymns in English while most sang in Creole and as we uttered the Lord's Prayer in different languages and were fed from the same table of grace, what divided us diminished even more and what united us rose to the surface.

Early on in the day, we greeted Monsieur and Madame Bellegard. They are the Haitian embodiment of Howard and Margaret Montgomery. Several years ago, Jennell and I stood with

Monsieur Bellegard on the rebar and weeds remains of a church that was never finished in the village of Trou Jacques. When asked of the greatest need in the village, the answer came quickly and definitively. The greatest need was not clean water, though that need is great. Nor was it food or books or teachers or medical attention, though all those needs are great. Smiling a broad, confident smile, reminiscent of the smiles that greeted every visitor to Central in the faces of Howard and Margaret, the answer was "A Church!"

Being a pastor, I have a certain affinity and appreciation for such a response. Of course, the village needs a church! Looking around the village, though, and hearing the response, "a church," I wondered if he was saying what he thought a pastor would want to hear. Needs were everywhere, basic needs, food, water, medicine. And, Monsieur Bellegard responds, "A church."

Last Sunday, watching a joyous process of people who had hiked several hours to be there and turning the corner to see the new church of St. Jacques and St. Phillipe in Trou Jacques, looking over the Bay of Gonave, with doors open not only to let in the breeze but open to all who wanted to taste the goodness of God, I finally understood the wisdom of my Haitian friend. Almost three years later, I was able to climb out of the forest of all that is lacking in Haiti to see the majestic trees of the abundance of God in Trou Jacques, manifest in this new church. I was able to see that this new structure is more than a gathering place to worship whenever the priest can make the tough trek to Trou Jacques; this church will be a community center, a job training center, an educational center, and a place of refuge from hurricanes and storms. This new church stands as visual testimony to some of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Listen to Jesus speak to his disciples in John's Gospel and it is a chorus of "that they may be one." Jesus was no fool. He knew how often people are distinguished by or distinguish themselves based upon their differences. He knew how often people hold onto their differences like well-earned trophies. He had listened to his disciples fight over who is first, who should be afforded more respect because of their title, who would be privileged in heaven because of their fine Christian sacrifice. Jesus would have none of that hierarchical nonsense among his followers. Jesus prays to God asking not that every person know their place and keep in it, but that all his children be one and live into that non-hierarchical unity.

In some grace-filled ways, my short time in Haiti gave me a much clearer vision of my prayer for Central as Jennell and I prepare to move to Virginia. It is not a new vision; it is the one that guided the lives of Howard and Margaret, and it is the vision that guides the life of Monsieur Bellegard in the tiny village of Trou Jacques. It is a vision inspired by some of the last words of Jesus to his closest friends, his disciples. It is a vision in the form of a prayer, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." It is not only a vision, but a calling for every Christian and every church. It is a vision and calling that I trust will guide the ruling elders who will be installed and/or ordained today.

God's vision of and call for unity at Central has been this church's holy calling long before anyone here ever heard the name, Gary Charles, and it will be the same long after I have

left. As you vote to dissolve my pastoral relationship with Central later in the service, it is only natural to wonder about the transition ahead. “What will change when Gary is gone?” “Will the new Interim Pastor be someone who helps Central grow and communicate better?” “Will the session be up to the considerable challenges of leading this congregation during a time of transition?” Trust me, I can top every one of your questions with three of my own about my new calls to ministry in Virginia.

What will bring calm and hope and direction to Central’s future and my own is to keep the words of Jesus before us, to remind ourselves again and again, that this is the church of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ brings us to unity even when unity seems like a distant dream. Trust in the words of Jesus whenever you feel discouraged and wonder how unity will ever overcome division in this congregation and in the world. Trust in the words of Jesus whenever you lose perspective and let yourself believe that you are in charge of unity. Trust in the words of Jesus and the bread and cup will be sacramental reminders that God makes us one and if God makes us one, then miracles happen, miracles like the ones some of us witnessed in a mountain village in Haiti last Sunday.

Today and long after today, my prayer for you and me is to lean into the grace of God, to live into the unity that Jesus makes possible among us, and to know the Parent’s love of the One who calls us by name.

May it be so!

AMEN