

A Reflection on my Third Visit to Dos Palais, Haiti

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Parish twinning between St. Michael's and St. Jean Baptiste, Haiti, is all about relationships, which could also be described as becoming soul mates. For the faithful of Dos Palais, the level of the soul may be more readily accessible than for us Americans but we can work to access that realm for a deeper connection to them. My third trip to Dos Palais taught me there are 4 access points: speaking their language; trusting them; listening attentively; and meeting them where they are versus where we imagine or wish them to be.

Speaking Their Language

The first obstacle we must overcome is the language barrier. While I understood from early on that communication would obviously be enhanced if we spoke Kreyol, my personal commitment to doing so has come slowly. On my first trip, I found speaking French to be a benefit, but only with the educated elite. By my second trip I could trade intro phrases with a few people: how are you?; my name is; what is your name. But I still felt I was far from real communication. After that trip, I continued to try to learn a little Kreyol, but on occasion the barriers seemed really daunting: I had no teacher; no regular exposure to the language; no specific study schedule. But I did have experience of times in my life when I opened myself to God's grace and found solutions I did not know existed. So I began to pray that, if I was meant to follow this ministry, God would somehow help me with the language, while I helped myself with what few means for learning it I had. Somehow, with my slow and sporadic attention to doing so, God enabled me on this trip to go to Dos Palais and communicate. Knowing vocabulary, decent pronunciation largely due to French similarities, and a few simple grammar rules allowed me to speak in probably largely incorrect Kreyol but I was understood and I could understand. God touched my soul and helped it connect with those of the people in Dos Palais, especially some who reached out for the first time to give me a more personal sharing of their lives by inviting me to their homes. So, if I were to give advice to others it would be to do your best to learn Kreyol, don't worry about being perfect because incomplete sentences still convey meaning, and let God guide you.

Trusting Them

Another obstacle is our tendency to judge and create our own versions of truth, both as humans in general and American can-do people specifically. This tendency, which is often exacerbated by our language issues, violates trust, a necessary ingredient to a deep meeting of our souls. An example on this trip involved a boy who came to the school nurse with a badly burned foot from stepping in his family's cooking fire. We saw him on the third day in a row he had come to the nurse in great pain. The nurse had each day sent word to his mother that he needed to go to the hospital, but our understanding was that his mother had not taken him because she had no money to get him there or to pay for treatment. We Americans had many attitudes and solutions. We

questioned the nurse's ability because this had gone on for 3 days already; we pitied but perhaps privately condemned this mother who did not do all in her power to get her boy to the hospital; we wanted to take him and his mom in the jeep ourselves; and once we spoke to Father Elizier about the problem, we were even a little indignant at his seeming lack of concern when he clearly did not like the "solutions" we offered.

Our awakening came the next day, when we arrived at the school in the late morning to discover that Father Elizier, in his wisdom and compassion, had already been there all morning making arrangements for the little boy. What we Americans did not and could not have known, but were quick enough to pass judgments on, were these truths: the boy's mother was mentally incompetent; the principal of the school receives a budget allotment of \$30 per child to spend at his discretion for emergencies such as these; a trusted young man of the village was able to take the child to the hospital on his motorbike; and since the mother could not be responsible, the child had an older sister who would ride with him to comfort him and get medical instructions on treating him. Later that day, the children returned from the hospital where the boy had received pain medication and burn treatment, and his older sister went over the instructions with the school nurse, who in her wisdom and loyalty to village hierarchy, and as a new employee traveling from outside the village, had deferred to villagers closer to the situation.

We had a similar experience when one of the water pipes supplying the village broke during our trip. While we may have had a small role in bringing the leak to Fr. Elizier's attention, a man in the village dug up the pipe by hand; found the crack; traveled to the nearest town to buy needed materials; turned off the water; fixed the pipe; and primed the system, which was back up and running within 24 hours. Of course, the entire time this was happening, we Americans were privately questioning his diagnosis and ability to fix it.

Both of these incidents showed how our perceptions and personal experiences interfere with basic trust. Because our ways are DIFFERENT from Haitian ways, we sometimes conclude that our ways are BETTER. We find it easy to assume that inept, irresponsible government, like has existed in Haiti, indicates inept, irresponsible people, but this is not the case. The Hebrew word for "holy" means "different" or "other set apart". Trusting Haitians to know best how to solve their problems is another key to our having a holy relationship with them.

Listening Attentively

In several ways, big and small, I also noticed that language ability and trust, leading to a deep meeting of the souls, are predicated on attentive listening. I saw that, in every day conversation, listening deeply enhances our understanding of accents, pronunciations and meanings. Barriers to effective listening include our tendency to dislike silences or the well-meaning desire to complete thoughts for people working to express themselves in languages not native to them.

On a larger scale, we had a meeting with villagers regarding economic development that gave us real insight into the importance of listening intently and deeply to overcoming our tendency to do. We went into this meeting with some trepidation, which actually made us better and more effective listeners. Our hesitancy came from trying to balance our parish's generosity and wish to help; with Fr. Elizier's express wish that we not create expectations of what we will do for his people; with the hope our relationship with them brings to the people of Dos Palais; with doing what will ultimately be right in helping them to create self-sufficiency. It seemed a really tall order, but balancing those needs actually helped us go into the meeting with no agenda and our only expectation being to facilitate learning. Fear of a mis-step kept our usual chatter and interjection of our own personalities to a minimum. No one who spoke was interrupted with our own interpretations of their answers, instead we tended to ask for clarification or additions to the villagers' comments. Silences were tolerated as we searched for ways to phrase questions and take in answers. Respect was given to our interpreter, Thimotheè, as he also chose the right words to express the meaning behind our questions.

Meeting Them Where They Are

In some ways, the results of the meeting were discouraging. We learned that our concepts of what "could be" for this village in terms of commerce, simple and basic as they seem to us, are at this moment beyond the villagers' hopes for themselves. For their children, however, we learned the villagers' dreams are as big as ours for our children, yet those dreams go unfulfilled in Haiti's isolation and lack of a middle class. We learned that people there just want a return to comparatively, to us, scarce, yet, for them, more abundant times they experienced a few short years ago, before worldwide economic decline; coup d'etat; and natural disasters.

Yet, I think as a whole, we pilgrims came away from this meeting feeling blessed in a new way because we felt we began to tap into that connection of souls that comes from understanding the villagers' language, trusting them, listening attentively to them, and finally meeting them exactly where they are. Our learning will help us focus on facilitating their own solutions to incremental improvement of "what is." We concluded our meeting by expressing our wish that someday, our great-grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren of this generation in Dos Palais, will come together simply as friends with no economic dimension because they will have told us they have achieved self-sufficiency. We may not live to see the full impact of our individual, however small, contributions to a better life in Dos Palais, but we as Christians must believe, in any case, our work to build connections of the soul is eternal.

Relationship

Responsibility

Respect