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Texts: Romans 12: 9-20; Ephesians 4: 1-6
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In the Spirit of Soup Joumou

Several weeks ago, we celebrated our Independence Day with traditional picnics, parades, and fireworks. It was great to gather-together again after a long period of separation and masking. In Haiti, Liberation Day is celebrated on New Year's Day ever since their independence on January 1, 1804, which was the culmination of 13 years of revolution against France. Haiti was the world's first liberated Black nation as they conquered Napoleon's army. The Haitian people are incredibly proud of this achievement and their subsequent role in inspiring slave revolutions for freedom in Europe and the U.S. This victory, however, placed them at great odds with these powerful nations who did not want their slaves to revolt and seek freedom too. This grave adversity set the new nation on a course of decline from the very beginning and the repercussions continue today.

Liberation Day is one of the most important holidays for all Haitian people -- those living in Haiti and the diaspora around the world. They celebrate by eating soup joumou (pumpkin soup) made with the foods that were forbidden to them as slaves: calabaza squash, known as the Caribbean pumpkin, carrots, celery, potatoes, cabbage, onions, peppers, pasta and small dumplings. It is a feast in a bowl. Basically, all they were given to eat as slaves was corn, rice and beans, the primary food for the poor living in Haiti today. These foods are never found in soup joumou. Each January 1st, every Haitian eats this soup as a symbol of their liberation and freedom from slavery – a celebration of shared identity for all Haitians around the world. Huge pots filled with soup are prepared by many. I asked one of our Haitian staff members, Richard, about the very poor and wondered if they had the opportunity to eat soup joumou too. He laughed and told me everyone eats the soup; it is shared with all people. The sharing of the soup is as important as the ingredients of the soup. It is a day that all Haitians remember their history together as one people. It is a grand festival of solidarity with all Haitians, a day of unity, pride and hospitality shared by all.

Haitians, like so much of the world, are living in a time of chaos and political crisis. For over three years, the people have protested and struggled against the corrupt Presidency of Jovenel Moise, who was assassinated several weeks ago in his home outside Port-au-Prince. The people wanted change, but not a violent murder brought about by an insidious plot to take over the government. I hope and pray that the Haitian people will come together after this violent act, and begin to communicate across party lines, across their differences, to compromise, to speak civilly, to respect one another and remember who they are, where they have come from, and plan a future that is good for the country and the people. They need to be reminded of the spirit of soup joumou. The coming together as a collective unity.

The eating of soup joumou continues with the Haitian diaspora to this day. An article written by Priya Krishna in the New York Times interviewed Haitians in Brooklyn, Miami, and Chicago,

and they all related the tradition of eating soup *joumou* on January 1¹. Jean Simon, who owns a restaurant in Brooklyn, says he can't ever remember a new year without the soup. He makes a big pot and puts it in disposable cups for anyone that passes by and wants to try it. He said, "it is a reminder that even though we are not home, we have something to hold on to our culture and bring all of us back together. We can invite all the people to understand our culture and what the day means to us." Another Haitian, Manie Chery, who has a YouTube Haitian cooking show, said, "Anyone who is against oppression and stands for justice and freedom for all people should be proud, and celebrate that first victory for enslaved Africans against their oppressors." Sharing a bowl of soup *joumou* is symbolically sharing in the Haitian collective identity and receiving their hospitality as a gift of their culture and pride. It is a wonderful way to begin a new year.

For 22 years, Ted and I have been going to Haiti and eating soup *joumou*. In the early years, we did not know the significance of the soup. It was served for special occasions, and many times it was a welcoming meal as we arrived from the airport. After we learned the symbolic importance of the soup, we realized, that it was a way of saying, 'welcome' to Haiti; this is who we are, and we are glad you are here with us. Please accept this bowl of soup as a token of our hospitality and pride as a people.

Haitian hospitality and their spirit of generosity continues to amaze me when we visit Haiti. About ten years ago, during one of our visits, Junias invited Ted and me to his house for dinner. He wanted to thank us for helping him start a little computer school and for extending hospitality to him while he stayed for several weeks in our home in Connecticut. He and his wife, Jasmine, and their then 2-year-old son, Myrv, lived not far from our office. We had never been to their house. In fact, before this invitation, we had never been invited to any Haitian house for dinner. This dinner invitation was a new experience for us.

I was a little worried about food preparation and drinks and if the food would be safe for our consumption. Trained Haitian cooks who prepare our food are careful about food preparation, but I decided not to worry about it and go with the flow. Junias was thrilled that we accepted his invitation. I thought how brave of him to invite us after spending two weeks with us and seeing how we live in Connecticut. By Haitian standards, all of our houses are very luxurious. We were touched by Junias' invitation, because it spoke of our deep friendship that crosses the barriers of race, class, culture, and poverty. We were invited as friends; Junias felt the need to extend to us his hospitality in thanks for ours. Reciprocating hospitality is so important to an individual's sense of dignity and self-worth. It is crucial in building friendships to experience giving and receiving to ensure a sense of equality.

It was a Sunday evening, and Junias arrived with his flashlight to escort us to his house. We walked perhaps a mile down the dusty, potholed, ankle-twisting corridor and turned into a narrow opening between two houses. His house was two houses in from the road nestled among many other houses, all about 10 feet apart. The small house, like many Haitian houses, was a square structure made of cement with a metal roof and an open porch. The meals are prepared outside. The table and chairs had been moved from the inside to the porch to receive us.

¹ Krishna, Priya, "With Fortifying Soup, Haitians Share Their Pride in Independence." *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 2020 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/29/dining/soup-joumou-haitians-independence>>

The table was set for six. The food had been placed in the middle of the table earlier, and a cloth had been draped over the food to keep the dust and flies away. We were asked to sit at the table with Junias. Jasmine, his wife, did not sit at the table. She was going to serve us. There were three more places at the table that were soon filled by Junias' co-workers. Just when I thought our party was complete, more people arrived, and then more and more. There must have been about 25 people including some children. These people were introduced individually to us, and then they gathered around the porch or sat on the porch floor. All of them watched us. Very few could speak any English, but they whispered Kreyol amongst themselves. I wondered how Jasmine would feed all these folks.

Soon Jasmine took my plate and served me a large portion of chicken and rice. I thought to myself "that is way too much if she intends to serve everyone here." She gave Ted even more, and the others at the table a little less. Only the six at the table were served. Nobody else was offered any food. Jasmine did not even serve herself. We were invited to eat. She poured watermelon juice in our glasses that she had prepared – a real delicacy – watermelon is expensive. The crowd of friends and neighbors looked on as we ate, thankfully with smiles on their faces. I felt uncomfortable, and I wanted to give my food away. I wanted Junias and Jasmine to feed the crowd of most likely hungry friends. How could we eat this plate of food when hungry people were looking on? But I realized that we needed to receive this meal with gratitude for Junias' and Jasmine's dignity and for our friendship. They can share food with their neighbors and friends anytime, but that night they wanted to thank us for our hospitality and gift to them.

When we finished eating, Jasmine asked if we wanted more, and of course Ted and I said we were full. Everyone in the crowd seemed pleased by this reply. Jasmine gathered more paper plates and served the remaining food to their friends, and she served herself last. Surprisingly, like the miracle of the fish and loaves, there was enough to go around.

Reflecting on this experience, I realize that opportunities to reciprocate hospitality are important in creating a sense of unity and building friendships. All human beings naturally live-in community. To live in community with one another means that each person gives and receives – there is a sharing with each other physically and spiritually. If a group of people are never able to participate in the give and take of a healthy relationship, there is break down of unity. Communities then become out of balance because of great differences in economic means, prejudices, and a sense of one's superiority over another. We witness this in structural racism and prejudice systems in our nation and world. Hospitality to all, sharing of your self and your resources in the spirit of kindness is crucial in our broken world today, where we witness so much division, hurtful rhetoric, increased violence, and a blatant or sometimes hateful disdain for the other.

The sharing of soup joumou, especially for the Haitian diaspora, is not only hospitality but a sharing of one's identity with another; a sharing of their history and culture. Sharing, story-telling, giving and receiving unifies communities, broadens our horizons, and helps us not only tolerate other people, but genuinely appreciate and respect others and build new friendships. The more you understand another person's life, their challenges and ways they have overcome overwhelming odds, the more you genuinely appreciate them and want to learn from them. I have learned this from our 22 years in Haiti. I have met the most fascinating and interesting people, and I have many friends who are very dear to me. I greatly admire the Haitian people

through our experience. This relationship with the Haitians has influenced my relationships with other minority groups as well. I want to hear their stories, I want to understand their culture, their history, joys, and concerns, because the truth is we are all human beings together – all equal in the eyes of God. In the letter to the Ephesians that we heard earlier, the author calls us to lead a life worthy of the calling with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, challenges us all to extend hospitality to strangers and love one another with mutual affection. These Christian ideals should not be taken lightly. We are living in a time of great division and hateful rhetoric. It is our responsibility as Christians to strive toward change, to practice kindness to all in our words and deeds, and to extend hospitality to all when the opportunity arises.

Cindy Similien, who has written many books on Haitian food and culture in the U.S., said “soup joumou feels especially meaningful right now as a symbol of freedom and unity to overcome the challenges posed by covid-19 and the relics of enslavement that still exist, like mass incarceration.” I think as a symbol of unity and hospitality, we can feel it as a symbol of hope as well, one that is so needed in Haiti and in our country as we try to build bridges that will bring a divided nation together. I want to do everything possible to break down the violence, the racism, the hateful rhetoric, and lack of tolerance. I am longing for peace and kindness in this nation and world. Kindness is all around us. We have not lost it, but how do we nurture it? How do we build communities that welcome all people, communities that are built of kindness and caring for one another? How do we teach this to our children and grandchildren?

I have been participating in a new group of volunteers in the communities from Old Saybrook to New London in a project that we hope will build and support interracial communities through public art. The group is called Public Art for Racial Justice Education (PARJE). This is a diverse group of volunteers working together to bring change through the arts. As our country struggles to address the underlying issues of systemic racial injustice, we believe that public art has a role to play in sharing stories and bringing awareness and education to our communities. The art projects would be created collaboratively and so the process of creation is as important as the work of art itself. In Old Lyme, East Lyme, Norwich and New London, public murals are being conceived that would strive to educate and illustrate ideas that might be hard to grasp. The theme for the Old Lyme mural is ‘hospitality.’ We hope that the mural will be placed in the Middle School as a teaching tool for inclusivity and hospitality to all.

We are working on the details now. In the image on the back side of the insert is a sketch of a mural idea created by Nancy Gladwell, an artist of Old Lyme. She illustrates a gathered diverse community. People of all races, genders, religions, ages, and a physically challenged person as well, are gathered around a table. Above the table is a ‘Welcome’ sign, so that each person knows their presence is important to the gathering. I like to think that the meal is a pot-luck supper, where each person brings a dish that is connected to their history and culture – maybe their grandmother’s sweet potato pie, or Lakota fry bread, or an Old English bread pudding, pad thai, or a pot of soup joumou. Maybe everyone could share a story that accompanies their shared dish. Building community can be as simple as a pot-luck supper where all are welcome, where stories are shared and friendships are made. I like to think of this drawing as a symbol for the communities and nation we are trying to build. As an image of all God’s children gathered together as one family, rejoicing in our differences and yet recognizing how we are the same in

our feelings, our love for our family and friends, how we want the best for our children, how we want a safe environment, a clean home, good education for our children, and quality healthcare. We are all living on this earth together; we are all God's beloved children; we need to strive for unity and rejoice in our shared humanity.

God's creation is rich in diversity, a gift to cherish and a treasure trove of stories, history, and cultures to explore and enjoy. We cherish the diversity of landscape on Mother Earth: the mountains, the sea, the plains, deserts, and woodlands. We see it as beautiful and good. In the same light, we need to rejoice in the diversity of our human family and appreciate it as beautiful and good. Let it be so, we pray. Amen

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