

“As Though You Were in Prison with Them”

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

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I have always appreciated the Spanish phrase, ‘mi casa, su casa.’ My house is your house; profound words of welcome. When I hear those words or words that express that sentiment, I feel I can flop down in the over-stuffed chair, pull the lever on the right-hand side, and let my feet rise to a restful, horizontal position! When I hear ‘mi casa, su casa,’ I feel I can open the refrigerator door and pour myself an iced-tea and carve a slice of cheddar off the block of cheese. When I hear these words whether in Spanish or in English, I want to take them literally!

As I lived with the words from the Letter to the Hebrews this week, ‘mi casa su casa’ became: your issue is my issue. I believe that is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Christian churches of his day. Your issue is my issue. His specific words are, “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them.” My translation: your issue is my issue.

One of the forces that divides a community is the tendency to segregate issues into categories. We’ll say things like: Oh, that’s a single-parent issue. Oh, that’s a gay issue. Oh, that’s an African American issue. Oh, that’s an inner-city issue. Oh, that’s a physically-challenged issue. We have a way of cushioning ourselves by placing issues into categories that seem to have nothing to do with us. But Paul argues for a different point of view. It may not be my son who is in prison, but Paul implores me to regard the man in prison as if he were my own son. It may not be my own daughter who is serving hard time, but Paul asks me not to separate myself from her plight, but to regard her as my own daughter.

One of the letters I pulled off the shelf this week and placed side by side with the Hebrews Letter is the one written from his jail cell by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; an epistle entitled, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." He was serving time for participating in civil rights demonstrations in 1963. The letter is addressed to all clergy persons. He states, "I am here because injustice is here." And then, he eloquently asks, 'why aren't you here with me?' His letter haunts me everyday. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews haunts me everyday. "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them." My sisters and brothers at South Church, your issues become my issues because we are in this life together, because we are in this church together, because we are in this thing called Christian discipleship together.

In my contract with this church, I am awarded a health insurance plan. A few years ago when one of us was hospitalized for several days in intensive care, all the bills were paid by the insurance provider. What a relief! What a blessing! However, that benefit must not separate me from all the citizens of Connecticut who can not afford health care. I can not say, 'Oh, it's their issue.' Dr. King would not excuse that. Until everyone has health insurance, it is my issue because we are on this journey together. 'Mi casa, su casa.' Your issue is my issue.

As we read through Paul's letters, we see he had the expectation that Christian churches would hold themselves to a higher standard than the surrounding culture, especially when it comes to this matter of being in community, caring about each other, seeing the other's struggle as one's own struggle.

I was in Wausau, Wisconsin last week visiting Lucas and Nina, ages four and two. On one of my ten minute breaks from being grandpa, I read the local paper. I turned to the editorial page and read a letter that nearly broke my heart.

The author identified herself as a Black woman who had tried to take some of her children's clothes to the local thrift store to donate them. But the clerk there let her know that her clothes were not wanted, that they were surely too dirty to be worn by other children. She ends her letter to the editor asking how long it will be before it's acceptable to be from some other place. Her issue instantly became my issue.

When my ten minute break was over, I sat on the couch and suggesting they select a book to read. When they chose a book called "Elizabeth's Doll" about an African mother and her daughter, I breathed a little sigh of relief. Their delight in the story felt like a light in the darkness. Perhaps it will be all the children who will teach the world the deeper meaning of 'mi casa, su casa,' your issue is my issue.

The church is at its best when its members name their issues. In one of my first encounters with Judy English, she told me about her Parkinson's, but her issue is with stem cell research. She is a fierce advocate for the health of those who will come after her. Her issue is my issue.

Dr. Minh Han came and told us about a rare disease found in children living in Tibet. I could see the passion in his heart. He told me about his plans. His issue became my issue.

Some of you will remember Millie Hollister. One evening, after a church pot luck supper, we were doing the dishes together at the kitchen sink. She was washing; I was drying. She reminded me that she had been raised Catholic and it would be important for her to know that the rosary would be said at her funeral. Would that be possible? Hearing her issue, I went the very next day to St Paul's Church and Father Quinn taught me to pray the rosary. 'Mi casa, su casa.' Your issue is my issue.

One of the best stories I know, a story that really names the ethos of South Church, is the day that Lois Richards walked into the office of my predecessor here, the Reverend Mike Stevens, and said, ‘I notice that when other children are sick and in the hospital, the church prays for them and sends them cards and finds ways to love them, but when my child is hospitalized at the Institute of Living, the mental illness hospital in Hartford, there is a deafening silence in the church. Beginning with Reverend Stevens and moving among every pew in the congregation, people began to hear the pain of this family. What had been the private issue of the Richard’s Family became the issue for the whole church family.

The church is at its best when we are able to say to each other, ‘This is what really matters to me. Can we talk about it?’

This Letter to the Hebrews calls us to pay attention to each other in ways that break the mold. The Biblical writer feels so passionately about this that he puts it this way: ‘Remember those who are in prison, **as though you were in prison with them.**’ May the passion of this writer be contagious in the churches in every place and in every time. In the greatest of hope, Amen!