

“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”

II Corinthians 8:2

OUT OF THE COMPOUND

By David Diggs

Jean-Claude Duvalier made quite a show of his generosity. The former dictator-playboy who ruled Haiti from 1971 until 1986 would occasionally have his motorcade speed through the crowded streets of the capital city, Port-au-Prince, as he threw fistfuls of banknotes out the windows to the masses, leaving a riotous rush for cash in his wake. His gesture might have been more appreciated had this money not been only a pittance of the money he had stolen from his people in the first place. Duvalier used the government’s treasury as his personal bank account, starving the population of basic services, skimming off international aid money, and bankrolling his wife’s shopping sprees to Paris. When he was finally forced from power and into exile he reportedly had as much as \$400 million stashed away in Swiss bank accounts. He and his family ended up settling in an expensive villa on the French Riviera.

It happens that Duvalier’s exile began when I was working as a youth pastor for a church in Nice, France, a few miles from his villa, which was situated in the mountains above Cannes. I never crossed paths with him, but the local paper would occasionally report on his forays into the expensive shopping district of Cannes. His exile hadn’t changed his spending habits much, but I think his generosity dried up. At least I never read of his throwing fistfuls of Francs to the French people.

Not long after Duvalier arrived, I found myself leaving France and moving to Haiti. The words Jesus spoke in the gospels both puzzled and haunted me: “How blest are you who are in need; the kingdom of God is yours. How blest are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied.”¹

I had grown up in privilege. Hunger and poverty were abstractions to me. I moved to Haiti searching for a deeper encounter with these people Jesus announced such good news to.

I took a volunteer position working for a Haitian pastor who ran a mission that had six churches and elementary schools and a health clinic. Pastor Christophe² needed someone to help reorganize the child sponsorship program that financed his work.

I was told that I would be living in the home of Pastor Christophe and imagined how life would be in a rural Haitian village without plumbing or electricity. I remember imagining this pastor’s life of solidarity with his people. I was looking forward to learning to live more simply myself, to building relationships with people who were struggling to escape poverty, to being weaned from my own attachment to things.

Pastor Christophe was there at the airport to greet me and three other American volunteers. He drove us to his home about two hours outside the capital. The material poverty we saw through the windows of the pastor’s SUV was truly stunning. Port-au-Prince, with its crumbling infrastructure, looked like a war zone. People were everywhere, everyone working, sweating, hustling to survive. Tiny barefoot children rushed through the traffic, leaping onto moving vehicles to wipe the dust from windshields, hoping the driver would reward them with a little change for their work. Any notion I had that poor people were just lazy immediately evaporated.

This initial encounter with Haiti was jarring, but I had at least been warned to brace myself. What no one prepared me to see was the home of Pastor Christophe.

We turned off the main road and drove up a narrow driveway that was bordered on each side by simple tin-roofed dwellings and then into an open yard. Sitting in the back half of this property was a two-storied structure surrounded by a wall. It looked like a cross between a villa and a prison.

The pastor honked his horn, and then I heard someone fumbling with keys inside. The large metal doors were eventually unlocked and pushed open by one of the servants, and we drove into a garage behind the walls. We stepped out of the pastor’s SUV and passed through the garage into a courtyard that had a small tropical garden in the middle. I was shown to my new room up on the second floor, with a ceiling fan, some simple furnishings, and a tiled bathroom with plumbing and running water. I was relieved that I wouldn’t be denied some of my customary comforts but also disappointed in a way.

My disappointment then turned to dismay when I stepped out on the balcony of my room and looked out beyond the back wall of the pastor’s compound. Just beyond the wall was a little squatter settlement, with nearly a dozen little one-room mud huts with thatched roofs and little malnourished children walking around.

I wanted to hide. The disparity was jarring and left me feeling like a colonial master looking down on subjugated natives. How was I going to build authentic relationships with the people in my new community while living behind a locked gate and perched above them in what must have looked like a palace?

The next morning the three other volunteers who had traveled with me to Haiti and I met with the pastor. He took us to his headquarters in the nearest town and showed us the school he had built and the clinic he hoped to build with the help of U.S. work groups and local masons. In the coming weeks he would take us to the other communities where he had churches and schools.

While sitting in his air-conditioned office, he explained that the folks in the squatter settlement behind his house were not Christians and that he preferred for us to stay inside the compound and limit our interaction with them. Under no circumstances should we bring them into the compound.

I was left feeling terribly conflicted. The man I had come to serve with, who was evidently doing a lot of good by building schools and clinics, had apparently enriched himself in the process to create a comfortable life far beyond the reach of others in his community. He explained that he had built his house up and put a wall around it so that he could properly host the mission groups and work teams that came from the U.S. They would not be comfortable without modern conveniences. The wall was necessary to make the visitors feel safe.

Later in the day Pastor Christophe took us to visit an American missionary couple down the road. He knew that we might like to know our nearest compatriots and make use of their phone to call our families and let them know that we had arrived safely.

Pastor Christophe had worked for Mr. and Mrs. Perdue,³ the American missionary couple. He had served as a pastor in the church they had built and had translated for them. As we approached their mission I could see that the pastor’s compound was dwarfed by their fortress. Its walls stood nearly twenty feet high. The only entrance I saw was a thick steel door with a little peep hole. The compound stood in the middle of a large piece of fertile land that stretched over many acres. In Haiti, which has one of the lowest ratios of arable land per person in the world, this vast, mostly untilled and unpopulated estate was a rare prize.

The pastor escorted us into the main office where we met Mrs. Perdue, a middle-aged American woman. She offered us the use of her phone and took great interest in what we would be doing. When she learned that I would be helping manage the pastor’s child sponsorship program, she explained how their child sponsorship program worked. She then took us on a partial tour of the compound. Their living room was decorated and furnished just like a middle-class, American, Midwestern home. Her husband was stretched out on a big, cozy La-Z-Boy recliner when we walked in.

Again I was conflicted. These missionaries had left their home and were making real sacrifices by being in Haiti, but they lived in almost total isolation from the people they were there to serve. Though they had built a large, well-equipped school, they had almost no relationship with the people in their community. Neither missionary spoke Creole, though they had been in Haiti for twelve years. They had to do all their communication through interpreters. The Perdues were the pastor’s model for ministry.

In the weeks that followed, life in the compound felt more and more confining, and so I started sneaking out to spend time with the people who lived in the squatter settlement below my

¹ (Luke 6:20-21 NEB)

² Not his real name.

³ Not their real name.

room. My Creole was still very limited, and my French was largely useless with these folks who were all unschooled. But they were friendly and welcoming and gamely allowed me to practice my Creole on them.

Their relationship with the pastor, though, was frosty. He had a deep well that supplied the compound with running potable water. There was a single spigot outside the house. But the only family allowed access to this clean water was the Evangelical family that owned a relatively nice cinderblock home on an adjacent piece of property. The squatters resented the pastor for the rats his trash heap attracted behind his house; they hardly had the means to generate any trash themselves. As long as they considered Pastor Christophe to be such a bad neighbor, it was clear the gospel message wouldn't penetrate the walls of the compound.

One Saturday morning I decided that I would make what felt like a bold move. I would invite folks in the squatter settlement to attend the pastor's nearby church with me. I didn't know how they would react, but I thought that this might be a way to break down the barriers between the pastor and these neighbors. Everyone I asked, though, was non-committal, politely saying no by not saying yes. Everyone except Solange.

Solange was a young woman, whose son Johnny was often sick and clearly undernourished. She had an innocent simplicity about her that made her seem both wise and childlike. She had a beautiful smile and a beautiful face, with a lazy left eye that always peered off to her right side. She enthusiastically accepted my invitation, apparently unaware that she would be crossing an invisible line of hostility by attending the pastor's church.

On Sunday morning I went back to tell Solange that we would need to leave for church soon. She was still feeding Johnny and wasn't ready. No one in the community had a watch or would have been able to read the time even if they had had a watch. So my announcement sent the women in the settlement into a flurry of activity.

Suddenly I realized a problem my invitation to Solange had created. People really dress up for church in Haiti. Where would someone as poor as Solange find clothes that were nice enough? It was humiliating enough for an illiterate person to go to church where everyone put a lot of emphasis on reading the Bible and singing from hymnals. Appearing without being properly dressed would be out of the question.

Then I watched something almost miraculous unfold. None of the women in the community could have independently dressed nicely enough for church, but together they dressed Solange, each woman offering the best she had. Solange went from hut to hut and in a few minutes she emerged dressed not just appropriately, but beautifully.

I was reminded of the description of the 1st century church in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Survival for Solange and her neighbors could never be taken for granted. They survived by sharing. How sad, I thought, that the model for church that many missionaries had brought to Haiti had now strayed so far from this kind of sharing. Certainly the Perdues and Pastor Christophe gave a lot away and helped a lot of people through their ministries, but they did all their giving from a position of sequestered power, which generated much resentment in the people they were trying to help.

It wasn't long after this experience with Solange that I met Sandy. Solange's son, Johnny, was very sick again, and we were trying to find a clinic for him. "Sandy, Sandy, take her to see Sandy," one neighbor said.

Sandy was another American missionary, a nurse practitioner, who ran a clinic that was part of the Perdue's

mission. She had started out in the compound, but felt too isolated, so moved into a simple house in the local community.

Unlike the isolated missionary couple, Sandy quickly mastered the local language. She had to. She shared her medical expertise with the community, and they showered her with gifts of fruit and food and whatever they had to share. Most of all, they gave her their friendship. Surely there must have still been cross-cultural complications in their relationships, but there was clearly more trust between Sandy and the people of the community precisely because she hadn't hidden behind walls or afforded herself comforts that were unavailable to the rest of the community.

There are different ways to give. Jean Claude Duvalier, Pastor Christophe, the Perdues, and Sandy each had their ways. Duvalier threw fistfuls of money with one hand while using the other to steal and destroy. Pastor Christophe had enriched himself off the money sent to aid his people, but at least he wasn't actively repressing them. Neither the pastor nor the Perdues were as isolated from the reality of the people as Duvalier in the Presidential Palace, but they all did their giving from a comfortable distance.

Sandy, on the other hand, stepped outside the compound and shared her life with the community. With her education and connections in the U.S., she could never become poor in the way her Haitian neighbors were. But her lifestyle choices communicated to her neighbors that she loved them more than her own comfort and status. There was a real cost to being so available to these people who were often in great need. In return for her vulnerability, though, her neighbors sustained her with their friendship, love, and generosity. She was rich in a way that Duvalier couldn't dream of.

Sandy's move from the compound into the community was inspired by Jesus, who provided for her the ultimate model for giving as God incarnate, who left celestial splendor to be born among us. This kind of giving is costly. Jesus so challenged the powers and potentates of his day with his message of God's love that they hung him to die on a Roman cross.

The example of Jesus, Sandy, and others gave my co-workers and me the courage to eventually leave our compound and move into the community. Later we made this choice explicit, saying in *Beyond Borders'* founding principles that "we should not isolate ourselves in such a way that we don't taste anything of the suffering of the poor" (from "Principles of Engagement"). When volunteers now come to Haiti through our Apprenticeship in Shared Living, we place them not in a protective compound, but in the home of a typical Haitian family where they can share in the life of a regular Haitian community. And when we host short-term groups in Haiti, we don't put them up in a hotel or a missionary compound, we organize for typical Haitian families to take them in and demonstrate their incomparable hospitality.

I lived in Haiti for nearly ten years. The move from the compound into the community became a metaphor for the struggle I faced daily. For even after physically leaving the compound, I constantly faced choices of either isolating and protecting myself or opening myself up and sharing more in the joys and pains of those around me.

I now live with my wife and daughter in Washington, DC. The move back to the U.S. was, in many respects, a move back into the compound. Here in the relative affluence of this community, I am relieved of the daily pressures of seeing my neighbors in need. I look out my bedroom window and see no squatter settlement or malnourished children. Back inside the compound of this middle class neighborhood, I'm protected from the harsh reality that billions face around the world. The great challenge now is to make choices as if I were outside the compound—that is, to live with my poorest neighbors in Haiti in mind.

The early church described in that passage in Acts had eliminated poverty and need in their midst, but not by employing some capitalist or communist ideology or any other grand political or economic scheme. They simply shared. Likewise, Solange's neighbors found that even in their extreme poverty, they had the capacity to clothe her so beautifully.

The world is waiting for rich Christians like us to step out of our compounds and move into the community of sharing. We will all be richer for it.