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Lessons from the African Ship of Hope

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Your Life Your Health

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As I watched CBS' 60 Minutes on August 4, 2013, about the African Ship of Hope, I wept. I remembered my three-months in Kenya, East Africa in 1964 and my desire to return to those wonderful people. This program caused me to wonder if I have wasted my life.

(CBS') Scott Pelley reported. "Around the world, countless millions suffer with diseases that could be easily cured if those patients could reach modern medical care. For a fortunate few, there is a lifeline called „Africa Mercy...she is the largest civilian hospital ship on the seas. But she is also the closest thing to a time machine you're ever likely to see. Her largely American crew brings 21st century medicine to people who...suffer from diseases unseen in America...Spend a few days...aboard the Africa Mercy and you will see how two worlds meet at the intersection of courage and compassion."

The reported continued: "(The ship) can be described in the usual dimensions of a ship; 500 feet in length, eight decks, a crew of 450. Or you can reckon Africa Mercy as a hospital; 90 nurses, 15 doctors, 78 beds and six operating rooms. One of the first doctors who invited us into surgery was Gary Parker, a maxillofacial surgeon, who came to the ship on a lark."

When you see the dedication and commitment of these servants of mankind and of God, it makes you wonder if your life has meant anything. For me, it is only the grace of SETMA's Foundation and of SETMA's care for many who cannot otherwise afford care which allows me to listen to this program only with tears. In my mind, in the program, I heard the words of my colleague and fellow physician who responded to an article about healthcare policy with his own story:

"Growing up poor in the Philippines where „free market“ dictates the level of healthcare an individual gets, I saw two of my younger brothers and my sister died of just very simple childhood illnesses. I realized that the little money I spend for a dinner out with my family today could likely save their lives at that time. Healthcare is not just economics, it is ethics as well."

I also wept when I read these words earlier in July of this year. I vowed to my colleague that SETMA work to insure that no person within our reach would ever experience this tragedy.

After hearing the Mercy Ship's story, I was glad of a simple and inconsequential event which occurred the morning of Sunday, August 4th. My wife and I were on our way to lunch at our favorite Sunday restaurant. It was hot and we were grateful for air conditioning. We came upon a car stalled and a man trying to push it by himself. We offered help; it turned out that he was out of gas. I offered to take him to get gas but he said he didn't have a can. I told him, we'd get one. The store close by only had a one gallon can but they allowed us to pre-pay for \$40 of gas.

In addition to encouraging this man with a gift of gas, because he reeked of tobacco, he received a lesson about primary, secondary and tertiary tobacco smoke exposure. I say this act is inconsequential because, we gave briefly out of our bounty and not out of our need. But, I was glad that this African-American man had received kindness from a Caucasian family. Normally, I would not tell such a story but today I must. Some of you will remember the story I told four years ago about an African-American policeman who reluctantly gave me a ticket when I had caused a traffic accident. The next morning, I saw that same policeman, out of his own pocket; buy food for a homeless man. The homeless man was Caucasian.

Read this story and ask God's blessing to allow you to show kindness today to someone who is superficially different (only in skin tone) from you.

Lessons from Life

These events caused me to wonder if we could not be doing better in the United States. I wondered if Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, as the faces of the use of race in politics, could not do better, if they acknowledged Caucasian physicians, taking their families and living their lives – not their vacations – but their lives, on a ship in 600 square feet of living space in order to give healthcare to Africans.

Flash back to the African Mercy Ship of Hope: "CBS" continued, One of the first doctors who invited us into surgery was Gary Parker, a maxillofacial surgeon, who came to the ship on a lark." Parker remembered thinking, "When I get an opportunity I want to come, maybe for a few months, and just see what this is about. See if I'm cut out of the right fabric for that kind of life." CBS asked, "And how long have you been here?...Parker said, Twenty-six years."

CBS described the Mercy Ship, "A lot of ways here haven't changed in centuries, most live on two dollars a day. There are few medical facilities. When the ship comes in, folks line up by the thousands for free dental surgery, eye surgery, and maxillofacial procedures for cleft palates and other deformities. Africa Mercy makes port in countries all along the arc of West Africa. Eighteen hundred miles where slave ships used to land. Trace that coastline and you've put your finger on several of the poorest countries on Earth. Here in Togo, the lack of development and the poverty mean that one out of 10 children...dies before the age of five. They die of diseases that we just don't see in the United States, including a particular kind of facial tumor that is a

specialty of the ship. What you're about to see is very hard to look at, but if you're patient, it will be worth it.”

No *quid pro quo* here. No attempt to suggest that there is equivalence between one Mercy Ship and hundreds if not thousands of slave ships, but the symbolism is real and the symbolism reaches out to each one of us with hope.

I have never wanted to be a surgeon until last night. I shall never be able to spend 26 years on a Mercy Ship to Africa as it is probable that I will not live that long. But, I can do simple and inconsequential acts of kindness to those within my community. I can invest value in the lives of those who are “superficially different” from me by helping those around me and those within my reach and means.

I wonder if Reverends Sharpton and Jackson would join me and others in celebrating simple, inconsequential personal acts of kindness. I wonder if others will support these non-dramatic steps toward reconciliation between people who are “different.” I wonder if we can all forgo “profit” either from the misfortune of others in poor health, or the profit gained by those who are mean or petty in the political arena. Jesus said, “Do unto your neighbor as you would have your neighbor do unto you.” And we, with one voice, willing to justify ourselves, ask, “Who is our neighbor?”