



[Alan Yarborough](#)

Trinity Asheville Sermon

Below is the sermon I presented to my home parish, Trinity Episcopal Church, in Asheville, NC. I give great thanksgiving for the lives of Anyo and Tiyolen, two people who inspire me greatly and who have shaped my life significantly for the better. I love you both.

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asheville, NC, October 18th, 2015

Gospel Reading: Mark 10:35-45

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Amen

I want to share a story today, one from Haiti that happened to me about four months after I moved to Cange. Though I'm a character in the story, it's about two other people, Anyo and Tiyolen. I've broken this story up into short chapters--each chapter with a brief fact at the beginning. This is a story that really challenges my understanding of what it means to serve.

Chapter 1

There are now over 11 million internally and externally displaced people from Syria--more than half the pre-war population of the country. <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>

My relationship with Anyo, a Haitian boy who lives in Cange, began to strengthen several months into my first year.

Let me tell you a bit about him. Anyo is very small for his age, 14 years old at the time of this story. He is an orphan, and he is HIV positive, but receives world-class care from the Partners in Health hospital in Cange, which also happens to be in the same campus where I was living. Anyo is originally from a small coastal town six hours north, but over the years he moved his way from house to house, family to family as an orphan until he ended up in Cange.

He has his good days and his bad days, most like any other kid. But on his bad days, depression can really set in, causing concern for his well being, and he can become really manipulative. But on his good days, his smile brightens up the world around him--he often dances to music if it's playing nearby, but doesn't like having his picture taken.

And he's so inquisitive and insightful, picking up on social and cultural nuances that many people, including myself, are often oblivious too. He reads the Bible pretty regularly, and asks provocative questions about the passages. And he also has some of the best manners of any person I know. Pretty remarkable for someone without a consistent home or consistent schooling throughout his young life.

This story, though, is about one of those bad days. Perhaps the worst day, at least as I first experienced it.

Chapter 2

Five years ago, due to a failure to follow health screening procedures and a failure to follow proper human waste disposal at one of their facilities, the United Nations introduced cholera into Haiti's most prominent river. Up to today, over 9,000 people have died and more than 760,000 people have become ill. <http://www.thenation.com/article/haitis-earthquake-was-devastating-the-cholera-epidemic-was-worse/>

Anyo came to me one evening as I was leaving a place we call the Friendship House, where the Americans living in the complex take their meals. He needed to talk to me. It was an emergency, he said. I could feel his energy--he was afraid. So I sat down with him on a bench outside, under the rich green trees that provide wonderful shade all around the campus.

He explained to me that the family that he was staying with--one that the Partners in Health campus director assigned him to--was abusing him. They would withhold food from him, he said, and they would make him stay up late at night until he finished work around the house. Then they would sometimes keep him from going to school, such that Anyo didn't feel like going any more because he was behind.

As he was telling me all of this, a flood of emotions and ideas came upon me. I immediately felt sympathy for him, whether what he was saying was true or not. But I also felt alone and afraid myself. Here I was with this young kid, who has no family I can reach out to, and who is claiming his closest guardian is abusing him.

I immediately recalled missionary training and how they explained we might come across cultural situations that we disagree with, but that it will likely not be our place to call it out or change it. In this instance, I remembered the *restavek* system in Haiti--where families will send their children off, when they can't afford to take care of them, to stay with a wealthier family to work in exchange for education and other benefits. It's a hotly contested practice, with some calling it child slavery and others saying it's a legitimate chance at a better life for some kids. I imagine it's a bit of both.

Is that what was going on here? Would it be right for me to challenge that? What if Anyo was just being manipulative? Ultimately I had no idea what the best thing to do was.

I settled on the idea that his host family might have a more legitimate reason to punish Anyo if he didn't come home that night. I also knew this particular family had a very positive track record hosting many other orphans in the past. So I explained this to Anyo and offered to walk him back to the house.

He rejected this quite strongly. Then he suggested, "I know! I remember the door of the room next to yours is open. I can go stay there!" I told him that wasn't my permission to give, and that if he did so, that would be his own decision.

When I got up to leave, he followed me. And sure enough, downstairs in my building, the room next to mine was unlocked. He went inside and closed the door for the night.

Chapter 3

17.1% of people in Buncombe County live below the poverty level. That's roughly 41,000 people.
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/37021.html>

The next morning, I woke up and didn't see Anyo in his room. I went on up to the Friendship House for breakfast, expecting to see him there. But I didn't. I figured I would see him at some point throughout the day.

It was one of those days that became so busy for me, I ran from meeting to meeting and didn't make it back to my room until into the evening, at which point, I admittedly had forgotten about Anyo.

But when I opened my bedroom door that evening, I heard a noise behind me. It was Anyo. I asked him how he was. "I'm fine," he said. He hadn't eaten all day, or even left the building, he said, because he was afraid his host family might punish him. I told him I warned him about that, then invited him up to the Friendship House with me for a snack I was already planning on fixing.

We had a quiet meal, chatting a bit about life in town. Then I brought up his plan for the night--suggesting he should go back to his host family. I could even walk him there and explain things to them. But this made him angry, and he left the building yelling at me and with an expression of great distrust. I tried to call him back in, but he left too quickly. I figured he would either come back or I would see him on my way down to my room.

Sure enough, when I left a few minutes later, I found him along the path. He was in tears, but more contained. And he started off by apologizing for being so angry with me. He just didn't know what to do. I suggested we call Marie Flore, the director of the complex to ask her what to do. But I couldn't get her on the phone. So we called another lady who I relied

on often, Madam Jeje. She picked up, and told me to tell Anyo the same thing I had already told him. He needed to get back to his house.

But Anyo wouldn't accept this--so he asked if HE could call Marie Flore one last time. She picked up, and he talked to her. When he hung up, he exclaimed, "She said I can go stay with Tiyolen!"

Who is Tiyolen?

Chapter 4

The U.S. has 5% of the world's population and 25% of the world's prison population.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laurenbrooke-eisen/next-president-should-sup_b_8288458.html

I knew exactly who Tiyolen was as soon as I saw her, but when Anyo started out toward where she lives, I didn't know who we were going to see.

Tiyolen is a beautiful soul. She is also tall. One of the tallest people in Cange. She is thin with long arms and legs, and she has short grey hair that is often put in short braids that are sometimes a bit frizzy and stick out in various directions. She usually wears long dresses with simple patterns on them that make her look taller. At first glance, she always seemed to me like someone who frequently experiences moments outside of reality, but she is actually acutely aware of everything that is going on.

She's the lady who always lays down on the concrete ledge in front of the school with her flat woven basket filled with candies and cookies that she sells to students. She can't make more than a couple of dollars a day, and that's before having to buy more stock. I also remember her as the lady that everyone in church turns and looks at when she walks up for communion on Sundays. Otherwise, I didn't know much about her.

So here I am, not knowing who we're going to see, following Anyo down a dark staircase that leads to where the campus kitchen is. And still nervous and scared, nervous because I have had no idea how to improve Anyo's situation and scared because have not fully processed that a solution may be minutes away.

Then Anyo walks into the kitchen, and through it, which almost has the feeling of walking back into a concrete bunker. And sure enough behind the kitchen is a small concrete room lit by a single dim bulb. And there's static music playing on a radio, and Tiyolen laying down on one of two beds in the tiny room, greeting us as Anyo asks permission to enter.

"Chita piti mwen," she says. "Sit my children."

I immediately recognize Tiyolen, and have so many questions about why she's staying here. Instead, I explain to Tiyolen what has happened over the past 24 hours. And I tell her about our calls with Madam Jeje and Marie Flore. And I start to explain what I think he should do going back to his host family...

And then she turns her attention away from me and stands up, towering over little Anyo. And she opens her arms wide, embracing Anyo in a hug while saying, "Of course you can stay here with me."

I learned later that Tiyolen was once homeless herself. And she would walk between towns 10-20 miles apart searching for families to take her in for a few days at a time. Until she ended up in this complex, in this little room that is now her home.

Anyo, by the way, lived with Tiyolen for over a year. He is now in the larger room with about 6 other orphans that Marie Flore's family takes care of. He's also back in school, and hasn't had a breakdown, at least that I have seen or heard of, since that night.

The Episcopal Church participates in something called the United Thank Offering every year. I'm sure you remember it. Those blue boxes asking for donations for what is essentially a grant making program that sends money to places around the world like Haiti, Panama, and right here in the U.S.

A few months after this episode, it was the Sunday for the United Thank Offering at the parish in Cange. And in that church, they conduct the offering by bringing out a small table and placing a plate on it at the altar steps. Then people come up to place their offering in. Except this Sunday, they sat out an abnormally large blue box with UTO written on the side.

After the box was placed out, the music started and people began to come up and give offering. The music, as the Trinity youth heard during their mission experience, is a bit like a rock band--drums, guitar, loud lively music. And as it seemed the offerings had come in, the music began to slow down and wrap up, until in the back was a stir.

Tiyolen stood up in her seat--now I don't know if you know this, but Episcopalians in Haiti are just like here--they have their seat in church and won't sit anywhere else. Tiyolen sits right back here.

And she moves her way out into the aisle--the musicians dragging on a little bit more unsure of what is going on... and she begins to dance, her tall body and outstretched arms towering over everyone in their chairs.

And she dances, all eyes in the church turn towards her. And she moves with grace. And the music picks back up, carrying her forward toward the altar. And it seems as if she is entranced by the music, having her own moment in her own space.

And just at the moment she reaches the UTO box and places an envelope inside, she stops dancing. And she turns toward the congregation. And she looks around at everyone very carefully, not as if checking on people to make sure they're noticing her altruism, but rather as a passionate challenge to them to serve.