

## **“The Gift of the Transcendent”**

Acts 11:1-18

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5/2/2010

Astounding events have taken place around our country this past week. Events that I believe have the power to change our lives forever- the question of course is “how” they will change us. While my head, heart and spirit are feeling the impact of a host of disturbing scenes, I want to focus on three, in part because I believe they require something of a common response in order for them to produce a healing and just outcome.

The three events are – the destruction of the British Petroleum oil drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico; the vote by the Arizona State Legislature and Governor Brewer to enact new immigration enforcement laws; and the testimony by the Goldman Sachs executives before the Senate Finance Committee. Just naming these three events feels overwhelming to me - what they reveal about the deep patterns and structures that shape our common life make me tremble, but I don’t tremble out of fear or helplessness, I tremble because I see so clearly that we human beings are incredibly capable of self-destructive decisions, I see so clearly how we place certain desires over others, even when these desires become so harmful.

Let me just say a couple of things about each of these three matters and what strikes me so poignantly about them.

The catastrophe of the BP oil rig was unbelievable. When my family and I lived in Berkeley, CA there was an oil rig assembly yard at the north end of the San Francisco Bay. I remember seeing rigs being built – they were so large that you could identify them 30-40 miles down the Bay. In order to get the rigs out of the Bay to the place they were to eventually stand, they floated huge portions of the rigs out under the Golden Gate Bridge on their side, and even then I wondered if they would fit under the bridge. Aircraft carriers pass under the Golden Gate.

The platforms are huge and seeing one of them totally ablaze in the waters off the Gulf was incomprehensible for me. And then, after a few days the entire platform just disappeared under the waves – like the city of Atlantis coming and going. 130 people escaped the catastrophe, 11 died.

But the destruction of the platform was just the beginning, now we are faced with three 1 mile deep, open oil spigots in the Gulf - with essentially no way to shut them down. 200,000 gallons of oil shoot into the gulf waters each day. The oil has floated to our

southern shoreline devastating life on land and in the sea. The environmental devastation will be immense and lasting. It is projected to be worse than the Exxon Valdeese disaster in Prince Williams Sound. The scale is beyond what I have ever thought possible – from the Mississippi delta of Louisiana to the shores of Florida the oil is drifting ashore.

Ironically, after decades of ocean oil drilling moratoriums President Obama had just opened up new areas of drilling along our Atlantic Coast. He has since put a hold on these new “opportunities”.

Any flippant remarks of “drill baby drill,” take on new meaning after this week. We want relief from our energy anxiety, we want independence from Middle-East oil so much, that we are willing to risk our environment and lives hoping for a bit of comfort. But coal mines and mammoth oil rigs keep the tension high.

The second event of this past week that was so startling was the news of Goldman Sachs methods of creating wealth for their company and investors. This has been just mind boggling to me. I always wondered what all those people on all the floors of those skyscrapers were doing every day, this week I found out. They bundle up failing assets, like every day people’s home mortgages and sell them around to each like the hot potato game and then they bet on who will be stuck with them when they hit bottom.

There is absolutely no connection with the people whose mortgages these are, they are just an unattached bundle of numbers that people in tall towers ponder new ways to make billions of dollars from. Financial firms as far as I can tell, have no thought of how best to serve the people whose resources, like their homes, they legally have hold of. They are companies whose charge is to make money, huge amounts of money, for their investors and employees. There is no tangible value that Goldman Sachs was creating with those bundled failing assets, but their employees and stock holders get paid millions of dollars for doing it.

The third event of the past couple of weeks is the passage of Arizona’s new law regarding enforcement of immigration status in the state.

The new law is born out of frustration that has built up over time. It is born out of change that is uncontrollable. The state of Arizona, as some of you can attest to, has been one destination for people up north to find a way out of the cold and snow each year. Like Florida, the population of Arizona bulges between October and April each year. It is the sunbelt and its cities have grown at exponential rates. People go to this water parched area of the country to enjoy the desert beauty and warm dry air.

But Arizona has the second largest border with Mexico of all the US states. Arizona sits along the fault line between worlds, cultures, wealth and poverty, centuries and skin color. In the last 30 years Arizona has tried to become the destination state for people with some means and sense of propriety, but what they keep getting is poor, brown-skinned law breakers by the thousands. Arizona wants to be a world that is pleasant, gentle and secure, but a stone's throw away are millions of people who have nothing and suffer from terrifying violence funded by people north of the Rio Grande.

Many people in Arizona keep pushing for their state to have one image of itself, but this other reality keeps pushing back. No matter how high the fences are, when some people suffer great poverty they will be relentless in pursuing resources that are in excess and within sight.

The only way Arizona will find relief is for them to see the people south of their border as part of their community. They and all of the US must end our provincialism and become, if not global citizens, at least hemispheric citizens. We must end the notion that our well being is separate from the wellbeing of Mexico.

I believe our passage from the book of Acts this morning has spiritual and practical wisdom to offer us when considering the catastrophic events of the past couple of weeks.

The passage is the story of Peter's strange vision and his movement into communities to offer the gospel of love.

Peter describes how a sheet or net filled with all kinds of animals gets lowered from heaven to where he is standing. Then he hears a voice from heaven say, "take and eat." Being a good kosher Jew Peter responds to the voice saying, "I cannot eat the flesh of these animals because they are not on the list of what is acceptable to eat." The voice from heaven says, "do not call what God has given you unacceptable," and Peter says, "got it".

In this vision the voice from heaven, or God, trumps the laws and rituals constructed by people.

The rest of our passage describes how Peter goes to the home of some non-Jews who are filled with God's spirit. Normally Peter would reject the faith of these gentiles, but because of his vision of the animals in the net Peter says, "how can I reject people whom God has accepted." Again, the voice and ways of God trumps Peter's old ways and he is able to move into a new future. God's authority, that is larger than and beyond the formulations of people, creates a new path.

Peter and his community were deeply invested in their social structures and understandings. Even when the structures of the temple and the laws of their community became destructive to their people and environment, Peter's people clung to their ways. Even the people who thought they were benefitting from the privilege of being a member of the religious community, but were in reality suffering from it, clung to what was said to be sacred.

The change that comes about for Peter comes via an intervention by a transcendent presence. Peter's vision comes from beyond what exists in his world. God intercedes in a mystical way because the people who God loves are stuck.

Mostly I believe we need to look to God's presence in our normal ways of life and I believe that God uses our talents to bring about the kingdom of love. But I also believe in God's transcendence. I believe that there is something of God that is larger and beyond this world that intercedes in mysterious ways.

I don't believe that all visions that people claim are from God are valid – if they are not consistent with Christ's teachings of love and justice I don't put much stock in them. But this doesn't negate all experiences of the divine.

As I try to comprehend the events of the past week or two and how they will impact us, I fear that we will find ever greater means to deny what is before us. We will continue to lift up the importance of drilling for more and more oil even when it so obviously chokes life from us. We will continue to value the valueless tradings of financial institutions that have no connections with the lives of people whose homes they control. We will continue to deny any relationship with the people across our southern border and people will pour into the streets in cities around the country.

It is now that we need to be aware of God's mysterious ways because we are entrenched and committed to so much that rips life from us. When the authority among us is distorted, the authority beyond us must intervene so we can see life with new eyes and understanding. Let us not shy away from the gifts offered by our transcendent God as we are confronted by the terrible realities that we have created.