

“The Ordinary Becomes Sacred”

John 2:1-11

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This past week has been one of great weight and loss. For our church we have said goodbye to two long time and significantly involved members/ Chuck Thomas and Gene Flug have been part of our church’s heart and soul, and we grieve their deaths as we celebrate their lives. Our prayers and hearts are with Ruth and Connie and their families in this time of loss and change.

In addition to our grief here, we are aware of and touched by the great tragedy in Haiti. The reports, pictures and stories of devastation in that tiny country are staggering. Each day, almost each hour there is more overwhelming information regarding the magnitude of destruction produced by the earthquake. Of the 9 million people living in Haiti there are predictions of 100,000-200,000 deaths and as many as 300,000 injured or without resources of food, water, shelter and medicine. It is unfathomable to me. The suffering of so many breaks my heart and hearts throughout the world.

I was listening to a reporter’s account of the situation over the radio Friday. As he tried to describe the overall picture of the neighborhood he was in, he turned and noticed a small girl lying near him. Leaving his script he started to describe her naked body covered by what he thought was a table cloth. The girl was in great pain from injuries and he noticed the shivering and quivering of the little girl’s lips. As he spoke, the reporter could no longer hold back his own tears, and he sobbed over the horror of all that was around him. This reporter’s human response to this one child melted the barriers that rise up around my heart maintaining some distance from the tragedy. I am thankful for people like this reporter who reveal what God intended the human heart to experience in the midst of tragedy.

On Thursday, during the Men’s Inner Life gathering, several of us said that we had also heard some of Pat Robertson’s comments on the earthquake and suffering in Haiti. You may recall that Robertson also commented on the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina as an act of God toward a sinful city. His comment about Haiti this week was to say that when in 1804 those who had been brought to Haiti to be slaves were declaring their freedom from France, they made a pact with the devil. Robertson said that ever since that pact the people have suffered, implying that somehow the earthquake, dictators and economic forces were things that the people brought on themselves. Robertson tried to temper his medieval hatred by saying we should help the Haitian people.

God’s heart must break again and again when she hears such hubris spoken in her name. It is only a shrunken heart that cultivates hatred, racism, greed and self-righteousness that could speak the words Robertson spoke, and I pray that his words fall on deaf ears.

When John recorded his gospel he had in his heart and mind the followers of Jesus, who near the end of the first century, were suffering great persecution by the Roman and religious leaders. For many reasons the immediate world viewed Jesus' followers as a threat, and an organized effort to extinguish the emerging Christian community was put in place. Early followers were tortured, publicly executed or excluded from the resources that could sustain their lives.

John's gospel was to be good news to these persecuted followers of Jesus' teachings. John's gospel was written in such a way that the people of the world who claimed to be powerful were shown to be subservient to God in Christ. John recorded Jesus' teachings and acts in such a way that God's kingdom, or new order, was made clear and present. Jesus' followers took heart that their present suffering was not God's desire and their vindication would come.

The account of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana is only found in John's gospel. All other miracle stories found in John's gospel have corollaries in Matthew, Mark, and/or Luke's gospels. The turning of water into wine is noted as the first sign of Jesus' glory or divine nature. In this event those who followed Jesus were to experience, see and recognize two vitally important elements of Jesus teachings and God's kingdom.

First Jesus ushered in a new order. Old understandings, old allegiances, old ways of treating people were gone and God's new ways were ushered in. Jesus' followers would have recognized this in the account of Jesus turning the water into wine because the jars into which the water was poured were jars meant to contain water for washing and making oneself ritually clean. Jesus specifically took these symbols of old rituals that were signs of human unacceptableness and he changes them into vessels of celebration. What was old and oppressive was transformed into what is new and life-giving.

The second element of God's kingdom so vividly present in the miracle is that Jesus takes what is ordinary and makes it sacred, he responds to scarcity and creates abundance. This is echoed in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When Christ is present life is transformed, the elements of creation are transformed and what was scarce becomes abundant.

To Jesus' early followers the story of Jesus turning water into wine was both symbolic and it was real. It was symbolic in proclaiming that all the religious and political leaders were saying were like the jars filled with water. Unlike water that sustains life, their water and washing was ineffective. In it people saw how they did not reflect God's image and never would. But Jesus takes these symbols of oppression, and strips them of their old power and fills them with abundance.

The jars of water were no longer signs of condemning authority, they had become real sources of God's blessing and a joyful community. The jars' contents became part of the

wedding celebration, the experience of love shared and the joy of life. Jesus knew the power of life and love shared freely and joyfully.

Much of Jesus' power in the world comes from his deep trust that old forms that burden life can be transformed into new forms that are life giving. To people who felt trapped by old ways Jesus was no less than miraculous. When some said nothing can change and that things are as they are because God ordained them to be so, Jesus said God has a different vision. But the greater gift that Jesus bestows is the spiritual liberation of people, so we too can transform old vessels into new, life giving ones. For Jesus, salvation was and is deeply about the presence of God's kingdom and ways in this world, for all people. Jesus invites us to trust so deeply in God that we can work miracles like his.

As I have thought about Haiti this past week and listened to how the world is responding, it occurs to me that there are some old water jars that require transformation and there are some that have been transformed.

Pat Robertson's words and ways are old jars of racism, hatred and judgments that are not of God, and they need transformation. Rush Limbaugh, a man of great financial means, scoffed at calls for people to give money to help with relief efforts because, he said, he already contributed through his taxes. His abdication of compassion is an old vessel that needs transformation.

Yesterday I saw a press conference that included President Obama and former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. I must admit that I was shocked to see the three of them gathered and that Clinton and Bush were to be special ambassadors to raise funds for the relief effort. To have these three working together for humanitarian relief is miraculous in my eyes and it gives me hope. At least for a moment an old vessel has been transformed.

Our nation, along with many nations around the world, has suffered from an economic recession for more than a year now. Because of this, conventional thinking would say that it would be difficult to raise contributions from Americans for emergency relief to Haiti. But this has not proven to be the case. The text message form of making contributions has raised record amounts of money. Americans are giving small amounts but many are participating. This is a transformation of an old vessel that would have us believe we can do very little with limited personal resources.

Jesus' first sign was an amazing sign, a miracle. This sign revealed the nature and wonder of Jesus the Messiah who came to transform rituals, thinking and all that served to burden life. But transforming life is not a calling limited to Jesus. He did not teach that the power to perform miracles were his only, in fact he taught just the opposite. Like him, we are called to transform old vessels and miraculously create new vessels of hope, healing and joy.