

A sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Shortly after I was born a newly-wedded, and newly-graduated-from-high school couple, moved in across the road. Over the next 18 years they became, along with my own parents, another mother and father. I went from house to house all the time, and on most days, I ate two suppers, one at each house. Doug died too young, at age 47, twelve years ago. And among the many things Kathy did in the rawness of her grief was to join a group of acquaintances, including her own dentist, to travel to a small village in southern Haiti, so they could provide dental care. And so for the last ten years for the first 15 days of January Kathy and several other Upper Michiganders have been transformed into lay dentists. And every year the images of children from the village who need dental care compel her to return.

This past week as we scrambled to get word about Kathy, I can honestly say I was never worried; I felt consistently that she was okay, but I admit to a sense of great relief on Thursday morning when I heard that Kathy and the others were indeed physically safe. When they can get home, and how they'll deal with the trauma they've seen, are altogether different questions. Think about what they will have seen.

We of course are a step removed. We hear with our ears, or see with our eyes images. Depending upon the source of your news, whether you get it from the paper, or the radio, the internet, or the TV, the images of the suffering in Haiti will differ. I get most of my news from public radio, which isn't better than TV or the internet, but it is by its definition less graphic.

If you get your news from the newspaper the same is true, excepting a few photographs, but you still have to create the images in your mind. On Friday, as Diane Rehm was beginning *News Roundup*, she said, "The news from Haiti is devastating, tragic, horrific...there are not enough words to describe what's happened." And as she spoke I nodded my head, as if she were standing in front of me. There aren't enough words, and even if there were, do you suppose they'd be all that helpful?

In addition to saturating ourselves with words and images from CNN, of rubble and dead bodies, and all the rest of the horror in Haiti, may I suggest that we do what we do every week: to saturate ourselves with the gospel? This week it's the story of Christ's first miracle at a wedding feast. And while it's not the story of Haiti's desperate need, it's a story that speaks no less clearly. You know the facts. It takes place nine miles up the road from Nazareth, in Cana, and John tells the story with great restraint. Jesus said simply, "Fill the jars with water" which tells us something: they were empty! The water had to be poured into the jars.

Take it as an image of eschatological hope in this moment of time. Think of this gospel as the foundation of our care for the people of Haiti. Whether it's through quiet prayer, through financial giving, or something else, our hope rests on Christ, whom I believe asks us to reverse the flow of abundance. In light of the great suffering in Haiti, maybe today's question is: how does the opulent wine of our nation, of our comfort, maybe even the bottles of Chardonnay, Merlot, or any beverage we can so easily buy and serve, how can it be changed into barrels of pure water for the people of Haiti? In other words, our resources of faith, and for many of us, our resources of money, and for all of us, our resources of deep intercessory prayer, can, to borrow a phrase from second Timothy, be poured out as libations.

Following yesterday's interfaith prayer service for the people of Haiti, which we hosted here, somebody asked me, with gentleness and kindness in her voice, how our worship could possibly make any difference. It's a good question. For one thing, this season, the one after the Epiphany we're in now, is all about manifesting Christ. The story of Jesus, in the whole of the gospels, points us toward grace, toward light, and in this church, that is literally true: you look east toward the sun.

We might discover that in the wake of our lament with the people of Haiti our discipleship with Jesus is strengthened. If so, we'll find ourselves connecting with Christ in his suffering, his death and his resurrection in a deeper way. We'll see the image of people around the world uniting to help the people of Haiti, and we'll be reminded suddenly that the Christ arrives in the form of aid workers, or in the shape of water, antibiotics, and food.

Or, and we have to acknowledge this possibility, we might discover instead that our discipleship with Jesus is tested. If so, we'll find ourselves questioning faith, or yearning for a sense of hope only to feel yet darker despair. Already the old questions about how such a disaster equates with a God of love are getting asked. Perhaps it's not a bad thing for us to be pressed to articulate an experience of Christ in the midst of this pain.

In the Old Testament, an abundance of good wine was a sign God's new age. And in Greek folklore, a miraculous supply of wine often accompanied the presence of a god.

Wherever your faith intersects in these days be gentle with yourself. Remember that God brings life out of death, always, always, always. Think about the abundance of our wine turned into their water, to transform our lives and to make glad our hearts, as a sign of hope.

Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee says to us that God comes in a new way. That's easy for us to say, we who aren't in Haiti. But Christ does indeed go to the people of Haiti: in the form of Upper Michiganders disguised as dentists, and Boston suburbanites dressed down as his disciples. And most definitely Christ is there as the child of a God who gathers cherished Haitians in his arms, the living and the dead.