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John

WATER INTO WINE

The waves of grief that have washed over us since the earthquake in Haiti have it almost impossible to think of anything else. Preachers are always in a difficult situation in times like this because although tragedies on this scale need a word from the church, people may already be saturated with sadness, and feeling helpless as well. I for one cannot bear to look at images of children being dug out of the rubble, or think of how many were trapped and alone in darkness because no one could reach them.

An NPR reporter was describing what he was seeing, in particular a little girl all bandaged and lying on a makeshift stretcher where she had been brought where someone thought someone could help her (and of course there was no one to help her), and her tiny lips were trembling, and all of a sudden this veteran NPR reporter began to weep. That moment, he was unable to do what he is trained to do, which is leave his emotions out of the story, was unbelievably moving. Many listeners wrote in to say that they had never been so affected by any other radio moment, but one listener was indignant, saying that there was no excuse for that lack of professionalism.

Well I say, if professionalism means never letting anyone know that your heart is broken, then who needs another professional? I'd rather learn about the world from human beings. I think that none of us can imagine the hell on earth that is Port-Au-Prince this morning – or how much worse the situation is because of the systemic poverty that has been the direct result of generations of oppression by colonial powers and their virtual enslavement of the Haitian people.

Televangelist Pat Robertson weighed in of course, and said the earthquake was a punishment by God for Haiti's "pact with the devil." You know, I am surprised sometimes that organized religion can even survive such monstrously idiotic people. I don't know what Bible he is reading. I don't know what Jesus he is preaching. I don't know how anyone could have taken him seriously when he ran for president in 1988.

Then I turned to the lectionary passage for this Sunday and it was the story in John's gospel of Jesus turning water into wine. At first I thought, "That's not going to work." A wedding? A joyous occasion? Water into Wine at this dark time of the year? Exactly.

To begin, let's remember what this time of year has meant for most of human history. Until only recently, human beings took the Winter Solstice very seriously. They thought the sun might not ever come back, and so the Incas tried to tie it down — the sun that is. The Zoroastrians stayed up all night and read poetry. Wild women tore the god Dionysus to pieces and ate him. There are, according to a source I consulted, "winter solstice rituals that involved pig snouts, ghosts, [and] the river Nile turning into wine."

And it was that last part that interested me — that great river that splits Egypt in half and brought life to that ancient civilization in the form of water, turning into wine. What an amazing image. But then, remember, with no artificial light, the darkest time of the year was frightening. Vitamin D is waning, which everyone needs, serotonin is depleted, and the body grows achy and fearful. What people needed was *light*, a little dancing, some good stories, and some really good wine.

And since the church co-opted every pagan ritual it could get its ecclesiastical hands on, the feast of the Feast of Epiphany took the date that coincided with the Isis Festival, an ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility who had magical powers. The Romans took feast days and layered over them the Eucharistic meal of Jesus. Epiphany may be on the surface about the wise men arriving at the cradle, but at a much deeper level, Epiphany is about how we respond as Jesus People to darkness. What do we do with the darkness — whether that is physical darkness or the great suffering of the human family?

And so in this strangely mystical gospel of John, which as I have so often reminded you is a completely different animal than the other three gospels, begins with Jesus as pre-existent with God. There's no birth story in John, but who needs one if you grew up in God's house on a cul-de-sac called "before time" and then paid a visit to the earth? Forget virgins and angels and shepherds — all this Jesus needs to do is show up with no known address and start telling people that they just don't get it! That's how I view much of John's gospel — as a story of the ultimate enlightened one moving through a world of darkness trying to get people to see the light.

Nicodemis — open your eyes. Samaritan woman at the well with many husbands, how about some living water? The disciples are hungry, and he says, "Oh, you're just talking about regular old food, but I'm talking about food from heaven — I am that bread. "Don't work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

See how everything gets "spiritualized" in John? And this is fine so long as we don't assume that this is literal language. Because I can tell you the people of Haiti could use some regular old food right now — I mean, real bread would *be* the bread of heaven for them, wouldn't it? I wouldn't preach from John's gospel in Haiti about bread right now, assuring them that if

they know Jesus they have heavenly bread. I'd be baking it, or borrowing it, or stealing it. That's why I think John's gospel is as dangerous as it is beautiful. Because the earlier, more historical Jesus prays, "Give us this day our daily bread." I like that Jesus. But then, I'm a bit a socialist.

I think the vast inequities of the world stink in the nostrils of God. And I think that before we get all spiritual about bread, we should get enough of the real thing out to more people. I mean what do you really think the Ground of Being of the Universe, the Great Wisdom of the Earth, the Mother Hen of the Cosmos thinks about the bonuses being paid on Wall Street? Just to sharpen the misery in Haiti by a comparison, here we are a year after they came to us hat in hand with dire warnings that the economic sky was falling, and now they will pay each other more this year in compensation and bonuses than they did last year when they told us they were near death? How much of this are we supposed to put up with?

Believe it or not, the story of Jesus turning water into wine has something to say about that. I mean, first of all, this is the first real story in John's gospel — we're only to chapter two — and all that's happened is that Jesus has appeared, gotten baptized by John, recruited some disciples and boom — we're at a wedding party. Jesus has arrived, let the celebration begin.

And don't think for a minute that the image of a wedding is without deep significance. Weddings are not just a big deal today (because they are so elaborate and expensive and often consumed by showmanship) but they were an even bigger deal in the ancient near east. Dowries were being negotiated, torchlight parades were held, the bridegroom would come late to the feast — there was food and wine, and feasting — lots of food, and lots of wine.

And the subtext that ran underneath every wedding was life itself — sex and passion and the possibility of pregnancy collided with the possibility of impotence and disappointment. Big blowout weddings were once about sending these two off to their wedding bed with a great fertile blessing — the dancing, the wine, the choreographed separation of the two until the last minute — it was all a kind of social, religious, and tribal form of foreplay. We want this to *work*, and by "work" we mean we want children. We want the blessing that is the future, as a sign of God's favor — here, have a little more wine.

This is why a certain palpable tension hangs over weddings as well (something I can personally attest to, ever since one wedding that Shawn and I did some years ago at which we were warned that if the brother of an ex-wife showed up at the wedding with a gun he should not be permitted to attend). The joy of a wedding brings into stark contrast the fears that hang over this absurdly impossible promise that people are making. Will it work? Oh God, please tell us that it's going to work.

And then not three sentences into our story and the mother of Jesus says, "They have no wine." This is not what you want to hear at a wedding in those days. It was like a death sentence. And here is the first glimpse we have in John's gospel of Mary, and it's not all

sweetness and light. One scholar put it this way: “She isn’t a naïve young mother gazing adoringly into the eyes of her sweet infant. She’s more like an irritable menopausal Jewish lady kvetching to her unmarried, unemployed son. “They have no wine.”

And his reply sounds strange, doesn’t it? “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” Sounds a little dismissive, doesn’t it? Lots of Bible commentators have assured us that this did not indicate impatience or disrespect, but I know of no mother who would not, at that moment, ring her son’s neck. “What do I have to do with you? You’re kidding me, right? Where shall I start? With the DNA? The milk from my breasts that kept you alive? The thousand diaper changes?”

To be honest, I think this is the writer of John’s gospel slipping in a little of the “you just don’t get it” Jesus on us. Especially the next line: “My hour has not yet come.” “What do I look like, the wine steward? I am supposed to make a run to the 7/11? Hey, this is pre-existence Jesus you’re talking to here, not the caterer.”

But Mary’s got more important things on her mind, like getting more wine to this party and fast. So she tells her servants to listen to what Jesus tells them to do. He then orders them to fill the containers that hold the water used for purifying. Those are the big pots of water for washing one’s hands in a religious subculture where such purity rituals were more than just hygienic. So the symbolism here is amazing. It would be like filling our pump bottles of hand sanitizer with wine. Good wine.

So good in fact that the steward remarks that things are backwards. People usually serve the good wine first, before people get drunk and don’t care what the wine tastes like. But now we get the good wine, and of course Jesus is that new wine, not the old wine of the first covenant but the new wine of the new covenant. And because Jesus has come, the new order has come, and it is all about abundance – extravagant, joyful abundance.

Growing up I heard this parable as an example of how Jesus would become a kind of alchemist for those who believed in him, turning our water into wine. I took from this story that Jesus fixed things, solved problems, and kept the party going. But now I hear it as a story that could be deeply offensive to those whose purity rituals, represented by the purification jars, are being replaced by a reign of excess — excessive joy, excessive generosity, excessive abundance.

Imagine if you will, waking up one morning and going into the bathroom and turning on the tap water, and out comes wine — good wine. And you are thinking to yourself, *I just wanted to brush my teeth*. This is a story about the love of God flowing into our lives with such unexpected joy that it replaces even our most sensible rituals. We know how the world is supposed to work, but God has something else in mind — and it is radically, unpredictably, even offensively excessive.

What would taking such a God seriously mean with respect to Haiti for example? For all practical purposes, Haiti is destroyed, and won't recover any semblance of even its former poverty stricken self for generations. What if we had the will, as a world community, to rebuild Haiti, along the lines of the old League of Nations? What if every developed nation came together to plan a massive reconstruction effort so not only did people have food and shelter and hope, but lived in houses that were earthquake resistant? The very same magnitude quake (7.0) hit the San Francisco Bay area in 1989 and 64 people died. The difference is the difference between wealth and poverty, between water and wine.

Or think of it this way: the bonuses being paid by Goldman Sachs alone would rebuild the city of Port-au-Prince. But Rush Limbaugh says don't send money to Haiti — we've tried that. It will just be wasted. And as for the president's response. It was quick, Rush said, in order to get the black vote.

This is the world we live in. This is part of the image we project to the rest of the planet. And Pat Robertson has the nerve to talk about someone else having made a pact with the devil? We can't defeat terrorism by dropping bombs that sometimes fall on wedding parties, and we can't live in peace on this planet if we allow some to be absurdly rich while others have to get food by foraging at the dump, or selling their bodies, or turning to crime.

The planet is groaning under the weight of a philosophy that everyone gets what they deserve, and that the marketplace is rational and self-correcting. In order to protect fortunes we have rendered our own government impotent through lobbying and back-room deals. We lack a collective conscience because we don't have a collective ethic. We think the purpose of life is to make as much money as we possibly can in competition with others who are trying to do the same, and if we run out of wine, then let those who have money go buy more. We worship the marketplace, not God.

And then along comes Jesus to say, "Look again into those clay pots you use for purification, to wash your hands and stay pure. Look at what business as usual has done to the wedding party of life. You can be clean but still mean. You can drink all the good wine first, and then when it runs out you can go home, but God wants something different to come out of your heart.

Forgive us Lord, but our apathy and indifference. Forgive us our long tortured history of colonialism. Forgive us for our greed and the way it has stolen bread from the poor. Forgive us the wars we have fought to make sure our good wine lasts a little longer. Forgive us for thinking that some deserve what they have and others deserve to suffer. Forgive us for blaming you when tragedy strikes. Forgive us, Lord, for turning wine into water, and then using it to wash our hands of the world.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, January 17

Lord of Life, let us bow our heads and with deep and real sorrow send a prayer a piece of our hearts to the people of Haiti. It would be untrue to say that we know what they are going through, because it is not possible for us to know what they are going through. They live in a parallel world of grief now just as they have long lived in a parallel world of poverty.

We give thanks for those who have dropped everything to go and are trying to help, even as there is not enough help to go around – not enough food, not enough medicine, not enough time to rescue the perishing. We know that in the days ahead there will be chaos and violence. We wish the world were not so busy fighting wars so that we could send our soldiers to fight for people.

On the eve of our remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr., don't let us forget that Dr. King knew that the real enemy of peace was poverty. And that the heart of evil was indifference. To honor him means to work for economic, not just racial justice.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord, and with tears for the Haitian people we pray, Amen.

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