

The wine of love

A sermon preached at Faith on January 17th, 2010.

The history of Haiti is not a happy one. Western understanding of the island begins in 1492 when Columbus stumbled upon the island that he named La Isla Espanola or Hispanola. Bartolomeo Columbus, brother of Chris, was left to found a colony for Spain which led to the near extinction of the native people, through diseases for which they had no immunity and an incomplete recognition of their humanity.

Spain's interest in the island waned as gold and other riches were discovered elsewhere in the Americas. To protect the remaining inhabitants from pirates, everyone moved close to the city of Santo Domingo on the eastern end of the island which is now the Dominican Republic.

Unfortunately, that left the western side, that part which is now Haiti, available to be taken over by pirates. Not an auspicious development.

In 1664 the French West India Company took over the settlement, named it St. Dominique and began the cultivation of tobacco, indigo, cotton and cacao which was accomplished by slaves shipped in from Africa. Nearly a third of all slaves brought to the Americas were put to work in the fields of St. Dominique, eventually totaling somewhere around 780,000. The conditions were so bad that the plantations needed a constant supply of replacements, sometimes 40,000 a year.

Slave revolts were frequent. After the French Revolution, the slaves were freed, sort of. The next hundred years were filled with even more treachery and suffering for the native and black residents. An army of former slaves eventually defeated Napoleon's forces and in 1804 independence was declared and promptly celebrated with the slaughter of the remaining 2000 French residents. There followed decades of revolts and coups but finally in 1874 a workable constitution was ratified and a period of peace and prosperity arrived. Haitian culture blossomed and thrived. But during the 20th century, coups and dictators were the norm culminating in Papa Doc Duvalier and his son Baby Doc. It seems that every time hope dares to raise its head in Haiti, it's like a game of Whack-a-mole. Hope is beat down, if not by greedy politicians then by hurricanes and now earthquake. Recently the drug trade has taken up residence in Haiti, agriculture is no more, the people survive on foreign remittances and aid. What little progress had been made since the last coup in 2004, thanks to the focused efforts of the UN and the world's NGOs, is now buried in the rubble.

If Haiti seems to be that place where Pandora's box was opened and spilled all of the ills of human sin, it is also right now the place where, once again, hope is arriving on a variety of wings. The list of nations sending help is heartening, heartening in that we can put down our dukes for long enough to give a hand to a neighbor. This morning we heard the litany of the gifts of the spirit in the letter to the Corinthians. Well in Port au Prince in the last three days, we have had a different list being read. To some are given the gift of strength to lift fallen slabs of concrete, to others the keen nose of a rescue dog. To others the gift of ingenuity to overcome the obstacles of ruined roads and collapsed bridges. To others an engineer's eye to dig in and shore up and rescue. Still to others is the skill of mending broken limbs and torn flesh. To many is given the gift of patience to sit and sing until help arrives. To many others is given the spirit of generosity by text and twitter and collection plate. And to many more is given the spirit of

compassion and tears and prayer. We are all part of the body that is reaching out to help and to heal. Every American is contributing and represented by the planes and ships full of soldiers and marines and aid workers. In this moment, the world is saying to Haiti, “we are here with you and your suffering matters to us.

Port au Prince is as far from a wedding celebration as we could possibly imagine so it was hard to even contemplate today’s Gospel reading. But there are some things about this first miracle of Jesus that can help us in times like these. The wedding at Cana is a most curious story that offers as many questions as it does answers. Right before this story Jesus promises to his disciples that they are going to see great things that speak of God’s glory which is to be revealed by and in Jesus. Interestingly, this story has an undercurrent of tension. It starts with Jesus’ mother apparently expecting him to do something about the problem of no wine half way through the wedding festivities. Of course, this is not to be taken as a supply problem. It is her invitation to Jesus to do what only he can do. He’s not particularly acquiescent, in fact he somewhat rebukes her, saying that it’s not for her to determine the timing of his work. And yet he goes and does it anyway but in a very subtle way. There is nothing flashy about this miracle. He takes the water in large stone jars, the means of ritual cleanliness and purification, and turns it into the wine of celebration. Also of interest, he does not do it so that anyone except his disciples notice it. The wine is turned over to the wine steward and he is amazed at the quality and does not know from whence it came. The party goes on and the miraculous wine flows freely. We are left to wonder about the people who drank that wine. Were they changed by it? In his commentary on the Gospel of John, catholic theologian Gerard Sloyan wrote about what the author of the fourth gospel was doing as he wrote this long after Easter and the birth of the church. He says, “John knows from the experience of years now that to believe in Jesus as the Christ is to live a life within a life. Nothing is changed but everything is changed. What had been water is wine. Word has become flesh. An hour that has not yet come is here...What will be is. What seemed to be is no more.”

What Jesus brings us changes every part of human life. In the course of his public preaching, Jesus redefined every relationship. He redefined marriage from a relationship of power to one of equality; he redefined neighbor – no longer just those we know and like but now even those we despise. He redefined family, no longer just his mother and brothers and sisters but now the whole Body of Christ. He redefined the outcast as those redeemed and reborn in their communities. He redefined peace from the product of imperial might to the product of justice. He redefined the relationship between humanity and divinity. But just as no one noticed the miracle in Cana, we have been slow to live the changes he brought.

While Mother Nature is not, God is frustratingly subtle in our lives. I enjoyed greatly a conversation with some of the inquiring minds of our newest youth group. Mateo wondered why God doesn’t just spit it out for us, just talk to us and tell us what is what and what to do. Wouldn’t that be nice? I told him that I believe that the divine wisdom is just that, wise. We must come to God on our own not because we are forced or scared into it. Real faith, real spiritual growth comes from responding to the invitation so gently and persistently offered.

And then sometimes it is offered in painful, dramatic fashion. We are presented with the suffering of others and everything we have tried to learn about love suddenly becomes real. We

realize in a moment that they are not strange or strangers. They are our family. They are us and we reach out because we cannot stop ourselves. Without realizing it, we have been changed from the water of duty into the wine of love.