

Glen Ridge Congregational Church  
January 17, 2010  
John 2:1-11: Extravagant Sign  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

A friend of mine who graduated from seminary just last year wrote in his blog this week, "I'm having a bit of a hard time right now. I'm struggling. I'm unsure of myself. I don't know what to say. The images coming from Haiti are horrific. The stories are gut-wrenching and heart breaking. And I have to preach on Sunday. I'm supply preaching this week – I turned in my bulletin on Tuesday afternoon – it has been copied by a very efficient church secretary already. I'm locked into preaching the gospel lesson from the lectionary – the wedding at Cana. My dilemma is this, how to link the passage about Jesus' first sign (miracle) to a message of compassion/hope/call to action. And it is also the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day."

I'm sure he's not alone in his dilemma – it has been quite a week indeed. And as I've been immersed in the events of the week, all the emotions of the week, I've eventually come to realize that this passage really does have something to say to us in the world we live in today, especially in the events of this week.

The themes of timing and abundance intertwine in this story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has not yet begun teaching and working wonders among the people, yet his mother has confidence that he can help when a crisis arises at the wedding of a friend. In the story, John provides us a glimpse of Jesus and his mother as human beings who had friends, who partied, and who fussed when something went wrong. Jesus, a young man having a good time with his friends, even appears to balk at leaving them in order to solve someone else's problem. The exchange between Jesus and Mary may sound familiar to the parents among us who ask a child to do something – from moving a bike left in the driveway, to cleaning up a room, to helping with household chores – not now, Mom. Not me. And yet Jesus does indeed respond to the need at hand after hesitation, showing ordinary compassion for the hosts who are in a terrible predicament, but his response, his action, is anything but ordinary.

It's important to note here – while running out of wine may not seem to be of crisis proportions to us today, and no matter how much we appreciate hospitality today, the people of Jesus' time practiced hospitality as a survival skill, a way of looking after one another in a hostile and perilous environment, and an assurance of being looked after in return.

Here was my first connection: a survival skill in a hostile and dangerous environment - doesn't that bring pictures to your mind of those Haitians digging through concrete with their bare hands to free those buried.

Back to the story of the wedding: doesn't Jesus' response in the beginning sound modern, even familiar, to us: what's it to you and me? But the second part of his answer sounds much more solemn: my hour has not yet come. Don't we wonder if Mary questioned what her son meant by that? Whatever she may have thought, though, she wanted to make sure there's wine for these poor folks, for everyone's sake. And it turns

out that timing, no matter how important and Jesus knew it was, takes a back seat to human need at that moment, as it would throughout all of Jesus' ministry.

It's in that moment of need that the reign of God breaks in – at an unexpected time, at an unexpected place. And here we have the first of Jesus' miracles.

And there's also the theme of abundance in this story: the response to the everyday but immediate, pressing human need of the crowd. There's an overflowing gift: six stone jars of wine when just one might have been enough. Those stone jars were huge – each holding 90 – 150 gallons – and they were filled to the brim. And from these big and special and filled to the brim jars came the best tasting wine served at the wedding. At the end of the celebration – not at the beginning.

I wonder if that isn't a sign for all of us too: the real human thirst, our deepest hungers, yearning, is for the life God offers us – the close, living relationship with the One who loves us. We are so spiritually hungry and thirsty that we fill our lives with “stuff” in a futile attempt to satisfy those needs. I often refer to that hunger and thirst as the hole in our souls. But stuff just doesn't work forever, does it. The abundance of stuff just doesn't compare with the overflowing abundance of grace that God freely offers us. And I don't know what brings that realization closer to home than watching a disaster unfold and its aftermath such as we have seen this week. Watching scenes such as we have seen on news programs certainly has changed our perspectives, hasn't it.

Timing and abundance – God breaks through in God's time and calls us to respond out of our abundance. We never know that God is all we need until God is all we have.

This week begins the week of prayer for Christian unity – a time set aside since 1908 by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. The theme for this year: “You are witnesses of these things.” Incredible timing, isn't it.

We have been witnesses of so many things this week, haven't we. We have witnessed horrors beyond words as we've watched the unbelievable news coverage. For some of us the horrors are so very personal: some of you have met my friend Gaelle when she's visited me here in Glen Ridge – her family is from Haiti – she is still anxiously awaiting word about them. The Haitian tragedy has a face for me, that goes even deeper than the faces I've seen on television all week. The same may be true for some of you.

And we've also witnessed miracles. People being pulled alive from the rubble after days of being trapped. And the sheer amount of money that has been donated for Haitian relief is incredible. From all over the world – and that made me think of the prayers for Christian unity week – countries around the world are responding to this tragedy. We are all one in our efforts to help. And isn't that what God wants from us. Isn't that what Jesus still tries to teach us. We need a week of prayer for Christian unity. Every week of the year. And we need to respond with hope and compassion and let ourselves be transformed by the abundant Spirit, all in God's time, not ours.

And, of course, tomorrow we note the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I think of the move to make Martin Luther King's birthday a day of service – I've seen articles that call us to make this not a day off but a day on. I've remembered it was on this day when I was in Middlebury that I began a tradition of taking a group of youth grocery shopping for the local food bank and then heading to the Soup Kitchen to help

serve. And you are responding to this call too in many ways: since the earthquake happened, we at the church have received emails and phone calls asking how can we help. You have a bulletin insert that gives suggestions – watch our website for updates and more information. All of us have something to offer in this massive relief effort, in the call to compassion and response Jesus models for us.

I've been thinking that the call to compassion Jesus shows us in our passage this morning also includes a call for justice. Like you, I'm seeing the news reports complaining about the lack of infrastructure in Haiti – and criticizing how long it is taking to get aid to those who need it. Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, still reeling from 4 hurricanes in 2008, now hit with a massive earthquake. So many relief organizations, missionaries, have been working in Haiti for years now – but perhaps today the world is paying attention in new ways to the incredible poverty there – and the justice issues that come as a result of that poverty. Surely Martin Luther King's dream of a more just society, creation of the Beloved Community, embraces all people, including the poorest of the poor in Haiti and in other places around the world.

There is another person who has modeled for me the response to Jesus' call to compassion – responding quietly with great courage, regardless of the risk. In the news reports this week overshadowed by the earthquake coverage, is the story of the death of Miep Gies – at the age of 100. You remember her as the Miep in Anne Frank's diary – the gentle friend who helped hide the Frank family and 4 of their friends for more than two years in the small attic apartment in Amsterdam. She's the woman who brought groceries and supplies to keep all of them alive and who, along with her husband, lived every day in fear that the Nazis would discover what they were doing. I remembered when I met her some years ago in Connecticut at a gathering where she spoke on the anniversary of the publication of Anne Frank's diary – and I remembered the intensity of emotion I felt when the story I'd read suddenly had a face. When the horror of the holocaust had a face - in person, not just in the pictures we'd all seen. She was a remarkable woman and being in her presence was an honor that's hard to describe.

Connie Schultz is a columnist for the Plain Dealer in Cleveland and had an article in this week's Star Ledger. She says, "In 1997 I spent several days following Miep from venue to venue as she told Anne's story. At age 88 then, she resisted all efforts to depict her as a hero. To idealize her, she insisted, was to let off the hook those who fail to act in the face of injustice. I am not a hero, she said. I don't like being called a hero because no one should ever think you have to be special to help others. I am just a very common person. I could anticipate the sleepless nights and the remorse I would feel later in life if I did not assist those in trouble. Remorse is far worse than any death I could have faced."

The call to respond with compassion happens often quietly in ordinary places, like at a wedding feast so many years ago, like in an apartment in Amsterdam, like here at our church, in our ordinary daily life as well – over 50 of you responded to the need for volunteers to host our guests this week. It's been a good week indeed – of hospitality, of sharing, of opening our hearts to our brothers and sisters in need right here. The needs of people, the need to create beloved community: those needs are always with us, aren't they.

It's so easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude – what do we do first. And sometimes the intensity of needs paralyzes us – but like Miep, we find

ourselves pulled to assist. Like Martin Luther King, we find ourselves unable NOT to respond. And even though like Jesus, there are times when we think or say, what's it to me, we act anyway because Jesus tells us to, because Jesus modeled that for us.

I don't know where God will call me next, where God will call us as a church next. But I do know that we're to trust God's timing, to trust God in all things, to ground ourselves in God, looking to Jesus as teacher, guide, and redeemer, and open our eyes, ears, hearts, and hands to pay attention to what God is saying to us, to what God is calling us to do.

What's first? We pray. We come into God's presence and open ourselves to God's will – we listen, we turn ourselves over to God and allow God to use us as God will. And God will use each of us. We are surrounded these days by evidence of that – in members of our congregation who have given their precious time this week, in Martin Luther King, in Miep Gies, in those who left home and went to Haiti to serve the poorest of the poor, and who now find themselves in the midst of unspeakable tragedy. By the desperate people using their hands to save loved ones buried beneath the rubble.

First we pray. One of the most emotional moments came Friday afternoon when a woman from our church and I talked a few minutes about the tragedy in Haiti – her eyes filled with tears and she said, “You know, when you come right down to it, all we can do is pray – because that's the only thing that never lets us down – that's the only thing that's constant, that's sure.” She was so right – because grounding ourselves in prayer will give us the strength to get through these and all the hard days to come. She made me think of the people of Haiti gathering there in that tent city in Port Au Prince, singing “How Great Thou Art” and other hymns. You never know that God is all you need until God is all you have.

How will the times we live in shape the ways we serve and witness? What hidden abundance hides among us, ready to be transformed like the water in those stone jars? What call has come, what need has arisen, what unforeseen opportunities lie ahead, that might lead to a rearrangement of your plans so that the reign of God might break in here and now? What surprises, what joy, like the surprise and the joy of the wine steward, might await you, us as church. Let's walk together and pray together and find out. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, Creator and Sustainer of all that is, we come to You in reverence and humility thanking You for the great privilege of prayer. With our hearts heavy from grief, our hearts filled with anguish for our sisters and brothers trapped in the rubble in Haiti, and our minds filled with questions, we come to you! Once again and, as always, we need Your grace and mercy. God, we trust Your wisdom in all things.

O God our Comforter! Wrap your loving arms around our Haitian sisters and brothers who are longing for to see their family members and loved ones again.

O God our Sustainer! Empower and strengthen rescue workers, keepers of the peace, medical personnel and preachers of your Gospel with your Holy Spirit.

O God our Peace! Breathe on Haiti.

O God our Healer! Heal broken bodies, troubled minds and sorrowing hearts.

O God our Joy! Penetrate the grief, pain and sorrow by the great power of your Presence that all may know, even in tragedies, that you are the Lord.

In Jesus' holy name, AMEN