

John 2:1-13

Epiphany 2

January 17, 2010

The wine gave out this week.

She called, we talked, pictures and words from Haiti were on her mind.

And a son-in-law who had been on top of the world with Chrysler Corporation as his only customer. Trips, a condo on the lake as a vacation home, fine restaurants – the sky had been the limit for him but for the past couple of years business has dried up almost completely and he and his wife are going through his savings..

Two years ago the woman who called me watched helpless as her husband died. But then there were doctors to blame. She has been through a lot but through it all she still kept believing in a God of love who helped in every time of need. But when she called the other night the wine had given out.

How could God allow that earthquake in Haiti to happen? Those people were already so poor. And now they are suffering even more.

I wanted to say to her, “Where have you been the past 80 years?” You have lived through Hitler and Hiroshima, a sister’s death of cancer, a brother’s mental illness, a father’s inability to speak for fourteen years following a stroke. You have heard reports of apartheid in South Africa, genocide in Rwanda, famine in Ethiopia, aids orphans in Namibia. Through the years you heard of starvation in Africa and India and China, Hurricane Katrina and the Tsumani in Asia, bombings in Ireland and London and Iraq and Afghanistan, 9-11. I wanted to say to her that if she and people like her had shared with the poor of this earth that the buildings of Haiti would have been as earthquake ready as the buildings in San Francisco.

Why did I want to say such things to her? Because I have no answer to her question. Thirty-five years of being a pastor and I have never come up with an answer. I have heard some of the answers others have offered – they only work if you are far enough away from the earthquake’s epicenter. But this week all those answers and excuses for God were no longer good enough for her.

How could God allow it to happen?

I told her I do not know. I spoke about Jesus.

The Only Son of God died on the cross. God did not spare him from that. It is that kind of world – it is that kind of God.

Once Jesus was at a wedding when the wine gave out. At Jesus command jars were filled with water – through Jesus water was turned into the finest wine – between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. The joy of celebrating that marriage went on.

John, the writer of the gospel tells us that this is the first sign that Jesus did. A sign.

A sign is not the thing itself – it points to the thing. The sign for a restaurant is not the point – rather it points to the place where there will be food which is the point.

Water turned into wine is not the point of this story – rather this sign points to a deeper reality.

When the wine runs out Jesus can supply new wine, the best wine.

When all joy has dried up, when all the goodness in life has been emptied out, when nothing in this world is a cause for celebration Jesus can bring joy again, goodness again, celebration again. The supply of joy Jesus can bring is beyond our wildest expectations – we would settle for a quart or two – Jesus supplies hundreds of gallons.

We always thought that if the world could be changed then there could be joy. If no innocent one ever suffered, if every evil one was swiftly punished, then we would have the wine of faith in God that would never run out. But when God's Son came into the world the world was not changed. Wise men told King Herod that a star revealed that a king had been born and Herod ordered all the baby boys in Bethlehem to be slaughtered. Thirty years later John the Baptizer was beheaded, Jesus was crucified, tens of thousands die in Haiti. Nothing is changed

Yet where there is faith everything is.

It was not just poor people who died in Haiti. A 25year old seminary student – youngest son of the first woman bishop in the ELCA – in Haiti for January to serve as a teacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Haiti died in the earthquake. His mother said this about him, "gentle, in love with Christ, in love with people, in love with life. He's been hearing God's call. His life belonged to God."

I will not be at the funeral for that seminary student but I know that it will be filled with joy. It will be declared that Jesus life in him has not ended, death is not the last word - God's love in Jesus Christ is the last word.

In one way the Christian faith is so very simple, God gets the last word and that word is love and life.

But to love in this world, to care about people always means a cross. A mother raises a son to go to Haiti to teach about Jesus and for the rest of her earthly life she will not have that son to talk to.

The woman I talked with may decide to take some money she is saving for daughter and son-in-law and give it to help people in Haiti – it will be a costly giving if her daughter has less than she needs.

God sent Jesus to a world where death awaited him – suffering pain, a cross.

Yes, God gets the last word but until that word is spoken love for God is costly.

But that love is water turned into wine. And joy that has no end.

A final thought: What would it mean for you that when your life is ended that someone would speak these words to describe you: "gentle, in love with Christ, in love with people, in love with life. He's been hearing God's call. His life belonged to God.

To have that be true of you or me is to have wine that never runs out.
Amen.