

John 2:1-11

2:1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sermon 1/17/10 by Susi Kawolics

This week we have all been affected by the tragic earthquake that took place in Haiti. Our media has been filled with horrific images of devastation and destruction. Despite the pictures, the video footage, the news articles, it is still so difficult for us to even begin to imagine the suffering and pain that our brothers and sisters in that country are going through. Along with all the news about the actual tragedy, there are, of course, a multitude of commentaries. This earthquake has not only shaken the lives of the Haitians, it has also shaken us – it has shaken our security, and has shaken our faith. Since we are a people who want to know why things happen, we look to our faith to provide answers to the deepest questions of our hearts. Why would God allow something like this to happen?

The mystery of tragedy and suffering is the greatest challenge to faith in God. If God is all loving and all powerful, why is there suffering in the world? There are some preachers who have weighed in with explanations for the tragedy in Haiti. I, however, realize that I am not qualified to speak for God, to provide God's explanations. I do not come to you this morning with such answers. Instead, I can only offer those beliefs that I cling to in times like these.

There is a book that I have been using with my Confirmation class entitled "Words for the Journey". It is a book of letters written by Martin Copenhaver and Anthony Robinson, both UCC ministers, to their teenagers. These letters are about all sorts of issues, one of which is suffering. I find Copenhaver's words on this topic particularly insightful. He says: "In contrast to the well-meaning folk who try to give reasons why people suffer, the Bible in general doesn't offer much in the way of explanations. The mystery of suffering is not solved. What the Bible does offer, however, are affirmations that God helps those who suffer. God comforts, strengthens, and upholds those who suffer." Copenhaver goes on to say that our God, made flesh in Jesus, knows what it is to suffer, so God shares in our suffering. . . He proclaims that in the end we are given something more powerful than an explanation. We are given the assurance that, in Jesus, God shares in our suffering – deeply, intimately, in a way that no one else can. And then we are given the additional assurance that suffering is not the last word. The last word is always a helpful word and a hopeful word, a word of comfort, of healing, of life."

The words of this minister both comfort and challenge me. That last word which he refers to is the word made flesh in Jesus, the one who lived, suffered and died, and then rose again. This word of God is a living word, a word that we are called to en flesh. We are the ones who are called to make real the word of God's help, hope, comfort and healing.

In today's gospel, we hear the story of the wedding at Cana. Jesus and his mother are attending this celebration when a problem arises. The wine has run out, so the host has breached the requirements of hospitality. Mary feels compassion for the host and asks Jesus to help with the problem. Jesus' initial response is that his time has not yet come.

There are occasions when we may feel God called to be God's word of help in a situation, to offer what we can in order to help someone. Often, our first response is like Jesus', that the time is not right. We cannot offer our talents now because we feel that we do not have the skills or experience to do what is asked of us, or we don't have the confidence. We cannot offer our treasures just yet because we think that the economy is too uncertain to commit our resources. We cannot offer our time at the moment, because we feel that what we are called to do will be too overwhelming. At times like this, Jesus sets the example for us, stepping out in faith even though he did not believe he was ready yet.

I have had the experience of feeling a call that I wanted to put off, that I was certain I was not ready for. When I was asked to fill in here as your acting pastor at the end of August, I certainly felt that it was not yet my time. I did not feel I had the training or the experience I needed. But I was asked by people who knew me and who had confidence in me. In our scripture, it was Mary who asked Jesus to help the wedding host. She knew Jesus better than anyone. She knew his destiny, and what he was capable of. She urged him to do something, to use his gifts to aid in the situation. And so he did.

I also needed a nudge from someone. The affirmation and confidence of the church Central Planning Board and the Western Reserve Association convinced me to step out in faith and to take this position. I was sure it was not yet my time, but your support and prayers have made my work here possible.

My experience has taught me that when we feel a call to reach out in faith to help someone, that God is there to fill us with what we need. We may identify with those empty, hollow clay water jugs in our scripture, feeling like we have nothing to give, and just waiting to be of use. The truth is, we are not empty. We have been abundantly blessed by God. If we didn't believe this before, the tragic earthquake in Haiti should make this crystal clear to us now. We have our home, our community, a church to gather in, medical care, food, clothing, communication with our loved ones. We are also filled with spiritual gifts, given to us through the waters of baptism. In that sacrament, we, like Payton who was baptized this morning, are filled with the Holy Spirit, the originator of the gifts we need. We have an abundance of blessings, an abundance of gifts just waiting to be used for the good. We are, indeed, filled to the brim. And just as Jesus changed the water in the containers into wine, he can change the gifts we offer into hope, comfort and joy for those who suffer.

One of the gifts we as Christians bring to those in need is of course our prayers. For some, that may truly be all they are able to offer, and those prayers are certainly needed and effective. I believe that God does answer prayer. But very often, the answers to those prayers come through people. Healing often comes at the hands of caregivers, justice comes through changes in our human institutions, meeting needs of

the desperately poor comes through generous contributions. When we pray for others, we are also called to listen to how God may be moving us to answer those prayers.

We have a special opportunity to be an answer to prayer this morning. We have the honor of welcoming our visitor Steve Denne, the COO of Heifer International, who will speak to us a little later and tell us about the work of his organization. This is an organization that not only fills people with the necessities of life, but also transforms their lives, giving them hope and meaningful futures. We are grateful for the timing of his visit, as Heifer International is active and working in Haiti to help people there rebuild their lives.

As we seek to hear the voice of God this morning, let us be open to God's timing, which may not always feel like ours. May we recognize the abundance of blessings which have filled our lives as we seek to answer our baptismal call to build the Realm of God and to help those in need. Let us trust our gifts to the one from whom they have come, that they may be used to transform the lives of those who most need it. And in doing so, may we be transformed into more compassionate, loving people of God.

Amen.