

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Practical Transformation"  
Dr. J. Dent

January 17, 2010  
Second Sunday After Epiphany

Crises bring us to places that are foreign and surprising. Personal crises such as marital breakdown, a diagnosis of terminal or serious health difficulties, job losses, and losses of loved ones bring us into places of shock and bewilderment, anger, and sadness. Corporate crises such as what is currently happening in Haiti, thousands dead, perhaps hundreds of thousands, and millions displaced and homeless. Such horrific realities hit us in different ways. We react sometimes as we do in personal crises, when we care enough. We react with a feeling of "what can I do to help?"

It's at that point that we realize something else. We have much great resources at our disposal than we often think. We are richer and more powerful than we think. And we mostly don't understand this until we have reached a crisis, a place where we cannot manage what we are going through. But in that moment, in that darkest moment, we realize we can experience what I want to call a "practical transformation."

In the lowest place of unmanageability and least control, there we find God. Where we cannot help ourselves, and turn to God, there we find what we cannot give ourselves.

Isaiah lived through the sacking of Samaria, the capital of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) in 722 BC. He prophesied the deportation and destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (the Southern Kingdom) in chapter 39. But in the midst of this terrible uproar and a feeling of everything about to come to an end, Isaiah also speaks of a restoration following such a destruction. Much of chapters 40 – 66 of Isaiah speaks of the great longing God has for his people. In chapter 62 which we read earlier, we hear God's longing for his people in the same way a groom longs for his bride. Therefore, God's people will no longer be deserted or desolate, but a delight and desirable. Paul later talks about Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride, in this same way.

David lived through much as he sought to live with the promise of becoming king, yet the reality of being pursued by the present king's death squads. Instead of being paralyzed with dread because of the armies out to get him,

he chose to turn to God, to not solve this problem with violence, i.e. kill King Saul, but rather would write songs speaking of the love of the Lord, and worshipping God as a refuge, as a fountain of life, as the source of light in a dark world, and as true hope. Now if you read the rest of Psalm 36, you know as well that he was acutely aware of the danger around him and of how many had no regard for God or God's ways.

Were Isaiah and David simply out of touch with the real world? Did they not see the practical reality in which they lived? I believe they did. But they chose to trust God with it. And when they did, they experience the resources of God in the midst of their crises.

Mary, the mother of Jesus experienced a smaller crisis at the wedding in Cana. She and her family knew the couple being married. She knew that they were running out of supplies, including wine, at the celebration. This would be akin to running out of food at a wedding banquet today here. It simply would have been a serious breach of hospitality. She knew something of what her Son could do. So she brings it up with him and a unique passage of Scripture in John 2 unfolds. As we bring our dilemmas to God, God does something unexpected. Jesus supernaturally turns the water into wine. What kind of intervention do we need in our lives, to be able to see that we have many more resources available to us than we ever could have asked for or even imagined?

There are supernatural and natural accounts to be heard in this regard. I remember hearing the story of the recovering alcoholic who said that God had turned his wine into furniture, for his family and for him.

The Corinthians were a bunch of Christians who weren't getting along. They had lifestyle issues, sexual issues. They were getting drunk at communion while others were not receiving the elements. There was much dissension and hurtful disagreement. And right in the middle of Paul's letter to the church, he writes this chapter about spiritual gifts. The quick summary of this passage is that each of us have something to give to the church to build it up. You may feel you have nothing to give, but that's not true. You have been given a special part in the overall picture that God needs to show you. And more than that, you need to know that you need others with their gifts, as much as you need to discover yours.

This is true for our congregation and every congregation. We need to know that we have many more resources and many more gifts and abilities than we currently have right now. And I'm thinking well beyond money, and painting and the like. Although certainly we need you to take seriously the mission that we have together here. We need to work together to make this place much more than it is currently. We want you to become more involved, more active, and more creative in making this a place that you want others to attend, and hopefully you feel the same way.

We have to come against that spirit that says we can't. There is a survival spirit that says, "We don't have enough. We can't pay our bills. We have to make sure we hold on to the little that we have." We need you to start saying to yourself and others that we can do more than what we are doing. We do have many more resources here than we think we do. We have much more money, more gifted people, more willing people to build this place up. And it is not just about the physical plant, but we have the ability as I've said it before to put a high rise on these properties we own as stewards of God. I've even heard of a Presbyterian church in BC that basically gave up a part of their property to developers which then allowed them several stories of office and meeting space and parking which they desperately needed but couldn't afford.

But this is simply a way to talk about having much more, just as we are realizing that hundreds of millions of dollars are coming into Haiti in a time when people are in the aftermath or still in a recession. There are so many resources available when we present it to God or to other human beings. It boggles the mind how much there is. I think that's what Paul was saying and what Jesus was doing.

And that's what I mean when I say we can experience a practical transformation, when we realize the immense amount of resource available to us, if we but ask. If we ask God, and if we ask others. Sometimes it comes without asking, but most of the time we need to ask, to ask for help.

Personally that means that we must humble ourselves to admit that we have thought in the past that we were barely making it, that we don't have enough to share, and that we better hang on to what we have, rather than giving away and planning for greater sharing and greater giving, always remembering the spiritual principle that we only get to keep what we give away. And that's true as much for churches as it is for individuals.

And so we come pretty soon to our annual meeting. And I know some can't stand annual meetings, but there is the place to talk about what we are doing and celebrate what we are doing, but it is also the place to bring up new visions and hopes and dreams. It is the only forum we have in the year to talk about what we are doing well and where we need to do better.

And lest we think the mission we have is only what we do as one congregation, this week of Prayer for Christian Unity is partly here to remind us that the Church is much bigger than us in this congregation. Just go into the Yellow Pages and you'll find nearly a full page of small print congregations all a part of the greater mission that we have together to show the love of God and the reality of the new life available in Jesus Christ. And we are even bold enough to think that we need new works to continue to offer new expressions of Christian faith and life to the expanding community in this area. Some do think we are crazy. But we believe there is greater need here, not only to gather people who currently associate with the name Presbyterian, but rather to reach out with the good news of God to a hurting and broken community.

There are dozens of different expressions of this one mission we have. Yet as the cities increase we continue to need to offer new venues and new hope for people across this peninsula and province. We also need to ask for help and to work together with others as much as we can. That's in part why I continue to meet with other Christians every week from other congregations who show me more of what is going on in the larger body of Christ here. It doesn't mean I agree with everything everyone is doing. It does mean I am trying to have more passion for what God is doing through this large number of expressions of the body of Christ in this city. And I hope that you will get more of a sense of this as well. Try to take in at least one extra event this week. But more the events, look at the people, and consider again the One they are following.

The water into wine is not an ancient myth, but an inspiration for how much Jesus is giving us as we turn to Him.

Let us pray.