

Epiphany 2, Year C
John 2:1-12
January 17, 2010

Two events, one here, one far away, have inspired me to depart from our gospel text this morning as the basis for my sermon, and have led me instead to spend just a few moments on what happens spiritually when people become connected, when lives intertwine. There is nothing in what I say that you don't know, because all of you have experienced all of it, so it is entirely for my sake, and not for yours, that I am doing this.

The event that happened far away was the Earthquake in Haiti that has been so much – and so justifiably - in the news in recent days. The loss is terrible, in people, in buildings, in programs, perhaps even in hope. When a series of hurricanes struck Haiti in November of 2008 the effects were likewise devastating and many lives were lost. Though I was concerned about it, my concern was of the abstract, almost philosophical kind that automatically arises when one hears of pain and loss, however it comes about. But since I had no connection to Haiti other than to be able to identify it on a map, I was otherwise unmoved. When the earthquake struck Haiti last week I was genuinely grieved, and I experienced fear and a sense of personal loss as I read the stories and watched the news. Trish Newton, who is much more able to understand her own emotions than I, and to give them the scope they naturally deserve, would doubtless say the same thing of herself.

The difference between my reaction to hurricanes then and earthquake now had nothing to do with Haiti in and of itself, nor with the different kind of damage each of those natural catastrophes brings. The difference was to be found entirely within me. In October and November of 2008 I was unconnected to Haiti; it was in truth an abstraction, an idea, denoted to be sure by a physical location on this planet, but without any real content in human terms. By January of 2010 Haiti had become real to me; people I know and admire live there; I have received their hospitality, stayed in their homes, eaten their food, toured their cities, stood in their churches and worshiped God with them. I even studied with some sense of awe the beautiful Cathedral murals that transformed biblical stories from their Palestinian to a Haitian setting, murals that are no more because the cathedral on whose walls they had been lovingly painted was destroyed. Because I am now connected this earthquake which happened nearly 4,000 miles from my home here in Spokane, Washington caused pain in me, and I dare say Trish, and all others in this congregation who have been there, in a way that it could not have were we not so connected. So just sit with that for a moment. The willingness to create connection opens the human spirit to the possibility, indeed the inevitability of experiencing pain.

The second event, the one that happened here, was our Teens Encounter Christ weekend, just now concluding. You just heard Keegan Caldwell speak to us about it, so I needn't repeat anything he said; I merely wish to emphasize that this event is designed to foster and support relationships between the

participants, most of whom are in worship with us this morning. TEC as it is called, is about connections, connections that foster relationships of care and concern and joy which make life better, deeper, more richly experienced than it would if those connections did not exist. I was not the sacramentalist for this weekend, so I haven't heard the stories of these particular young people, but I have been the sacramentalist for a number of other TEC weekends, and so I have been privileged to hear the participants speak of the life changing relationships that grow from this weekend. So sit with this for just a moment too, connection creates a richer and more profound experience of human life; it leads us into relationships that help heal and grow the human spirit in ways it could not without the presence of those connections.

Here then are two things our own experience teaches us about the creation of connections between people. These connections make life deeper, better, richer, more meaningful than it would be without them, and they open us to the experience of the pain and ache of this world and of the people in it. These are of course two sides of the same coin; they go together and must be paired since you cannot have the one without the other. That is, you cannot have deep and rich and powerful connections with other people without being opened up to the experience of the pain of this world. The famous line in *I Am A Rock*; "if I never loved, I never would have cried" is certainly untrue, but it points us at the truth we all have experienced, which is that real and genuine love does lead us

inevitably into suffering that we are willing to embrace because that suffering is part of the price we freely pay for the rich and profound experience of love itself.

All I want to add to this is a small point; that process of entering into relationships that lead us through love into the willingness to suffer for the sake of others is holy; it connects us to the life of God as it has been manifested in this world in Jesus Christ. If you want to know at least in part how God works in this world then look at the places in your life where you have been led into deep and abiding connections with others; look at those places where you have discovered the healing that comes from learning to love, and, having been healed in that way, discovered also the capacity to ache, to be heart broken and overwhelmed within the context of those very life giving relationships. When you find those spots in your life, then I say you have seen the fingerprints of God in this world.

For in the same way that St. John uses the story of the wedding feast at Cana not as a direct experience of the power of God, but as a sign revealing the presence of God in Jesus, so too does the fullness of a life of genuine connectedness with others serve not as a direct and unmediated experience of God, but more profoundly as a sign of that divine presence that underlies all of creation.

The more I go along the occasionally bumpy road that is my life the less I am able to believe in the god who is the grand puppeteer, causing, directing, everything that happens with an unseen hand that over time reveals a righteous plan. I do not believe that hurricanes striking New Orleans and earthquakes

decimating Haiti are the acts of such a god who is punishing specific people for their faithlessness. Indeed a god such as this – killing some and sparing others who have been far worse – would be capricious beyond imagination, a divine disgrace unworthy of even the slightest devotion. But an open heart, a soul willing to risk both the joy and the ache that comes from the deep connections forged by love, there to me is a sign of the one true God at work. For that is an image entirely consistent with what we see in Jesus, who himself forged the deepest sort of connections with a small group of people while he lived, and who was willing to suffer for the sake not just of that small group, but for all. To live is to know joy and pain, or at least that is my hope for all of us here, and to know joy and pain because we love, because we have become connected to one another, that is to enter into the heart of God made known to us in Christ.