

Epiphany II
January 17, 2010

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Today is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, and in this year of the lectionary cycle, the gospel is the story of the wedding at Cana. It's a story often referred to as "Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana or Galilee." It's also often used to imply something about Jesus' support of marriage... which I find odd since he is widely believed to have remained unmarried.

Personally, I like this story because of the little exchange between Jesus and his mother, which to my mind has something of a delightfully gritty quality. In any case, it is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany; the season of emphasizing Jesus as the light of the world.

It is also the day before the national holiday we have all come to call "MLK Day," honoring the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We are too close to his own time to know exactly how he will be remembered; but I am one who thinks that Dr. King will go down in history as one who helped guide this relatively new nation toward a more just society.

Since 1994, MLK Day has been linked with service and has been called "a national day of service." All around the country, there will be service projects in honor of Dr. King.

So there you have it: Epiphany and MLK Day. But where we are, what has overwhelmed us in these past few days, filled us with anguish and captured our hearts... is the unimaginable catastrophe in Haiti caused by a 7.3 earthquake.

The scenes on the news, the pictures on the front pages of our newspapers, the reports from people on the ground in Haiti... are enough to throw us into a kind of despair that cripples us. On the one hand, we can tap a few numbers into our cell phones and donate \$5 or \$10 dollars which will painlessly show up on our phone bills.

On the other hand, the devastation is so complete that we can easily be paralyzed by the knowledge that the situation is so overwhelming that we as individuals are powerless. We are so far away... it all seems so hopeless... what on earth could you or I possibly do that would make a *real* difference.

And yet, the generosity of the world community pours forth. Because for all our human faults and frailties, that too is in our nature. It seems that we are at our best when disaster strikes: 911, the Tsunami of 2004, Katrina, and now the earthquake in Haiti.

Let's be clear, though, about what is different about this situation in Haiti. David Brooks of the New York Times, speaking on National Public Radio yesterday put it most clearly: "This is a poverty issue," he said, "not a natural disaster issue. We had a 7.something earthquake in the [San Francisco] bay area some 15 years ago and 63 people were killed. Here we have 45-50,000 killed..." and he was using numbers we now know to be much higher.

Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Practically next door neighbors to the United States; arguably the richest nation on the planet. So what does that mean to us?

Are we responsible for their poverty? Do we have an obligation – I mean, aside from that good urge in us to be generous when there is a disaster – do we have an obligation to do something fundamental to alleviate their poverty?

I believe the answer to that question is YES. In fact, I believe that the only Christian response to that question is YES.

If you have any inclination to explore that possibility, then the next question is: how do we turn our concern into something that really makes a difference?

When I step into the shower while the radio is reporting that Haitians have had no clean drinking water for three days, am I to feel guilty for the luxury of a hot shower?

When I sit at the breakfast table with coffee and eggs... and next to me on the front page is a picture of a young woman's body in the rubble of a fallen building, am I to feel guilty for my bounty and comfort?

Perhaps. But in my experience, guilt isn't a terribly good motivator. It may be good for a donation. It may make me more likely to recycle or to donate things to Goodwill when both of those things are more time consuming than just putting it all in the trash. But that's about as far as guilt gets me.

What we need instead is a change in our basic paradigm.

Now, I know that the word paradigm got overused in the late 90's, but it's a perfectly good word. It means *the generally accepted model*. In this case, changing our paradigm would mean a basic shift in the way we see and accept the world.

It does me no good at all to feel guilty about my shower or my breakfast, and it does nothing to change the situation in Haiti. What might work more to our common good would be for me to feel profoundly grateful, and for that gratitude to translate into wanting nothing less for others.

This isn't a new concept. We have great tradition of helping others, and our motives are good. It's the reason we have hospitals, charities, shelters, and relief organizations like CARE, the Red Cross, Episcopal Relief and Development.

But these things, undeniably good as they are, do nothing to change the basic paradigm; do nothing to change the pattern of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

The kind of change I'm talking about goes deeper than that. It's about seeing ourselves differently; seeing *others* differently; seeing the world differently.

Dr. King once said: "*...whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.*" *

This isn't a popular concept in a capitalist country, is it. But it is a thoroughly Christian concept. And one deeply rooted in the season of Epiphany. Because Epiphany, you see, is all about the light of Christ coming into the world.

And we, the church, we Christians are now charged with being that light to and in the world. If we, therefore, are the light of Christ in this world, how can we do nothing? How can we *only* give our money and *only* think of this as a natural disaster, and not change the basic way we see the world?

But first, we *will* give our money and we *will* respond to this disaster, because this is an emergency. The Missions Commission of St. Margaret's

Church had its regular meeting Wednesday night and has responded immediately with a donation of \$3000 to be sent to Episcopal Relief and Development for the Haitian emergency.

Then, for the next five weeks – that is, until the beginning of Lent – the Missions Commission invites you to add to this emergency aid by way of a special alms basin near the baptismal font at the entrance of the church.

It's important for us to understand that this is not to be confused with our regular giving to the church. Our tithes and offerings represent our corporate support of the life, programs, and work of the church. This special offering for Haitian relief is in the tradition of *almsgiving*, that is, relief for the poor, which is above and beyond our regular giving to the church.

Then let this giving be for us the beginning of something deeper.

As for me, as cravenly materialistic as I know myself to be, I will endeavor to see this as a chance to make a difference; to give, not from guilt but from gratitude; to give not from my surplus – which even in these so-called tough economic times is greater than most of the world can imagine – to give not from my surplus but from my substance and from my heart.

I don't know how we all are going to do this, but I believe we must. To not do it, to not change the basic way we see the world and ourselves and others in it, is to consign ourselves to live with this burden not only in this life, but in the next.

So here is my simple prayer:

Lord, help. Help me, help us, to find the way you would have us change, first ourselves and then the world. Show us how to be Christ's light. Amen.

Lori M. Lowe+