

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
17 January 2010**

2 Epiphany: Ps 36:5-10; Isa 62:1-5;

1 Cor 12:1-11; Jn 2:1-11

Thomas Eoyang

John tells us that turning the water into wine was Jesus' first "sign," his first miracle. Does it appear to you, as it sometimes does to me, that for his debut miracle Jesus picks something rather frivolous? He basically helps to keep a party going. At a wedding banquet they've run out of wine—who knows how much they had to start with—and after his mother brings this to his attention, and after he says it's none of his business or hers, he turns 180 gallons of water into fine wine. The steward notices how good the wine is, and tells the bridegroom that he should have served this wine first.

Very little is at stake here: no one is sick and about to die, no one is hungry, no one is suffering from a chronic, crippling disease that prevents a full and active life. Jesus could have chosen any one of a number of telling actions for his debut miracle. Of most practical use for us this week is something he could have done which would have made for a very strange story—none of the gospel writers would have had the ability to report it. He could have gone out to the nearest geological fault line and stamped his foot and then said to anyone who would listen, "That shifting tectonic plate thing is fixed. I've fused them all together, and from now on there won't be anymore earthquakes."

This would have given us the huge benefit of preventing future Christian leaders from saying unscientific, historically inaccurate, and theologically inane things like an earthquake is the result of the sin of the people who endure it. If natural disasters are God's punishment for sin, then people everywhere on every continent including ours would be suffering earthquakes, hailstorms, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, and floods on a regular basis. Oh wait: we are. But those of us who are educated and reasonable understand these to be the geological and meteorological facts of life on this planet.

Make no mistake: there are religious issues to think about with natural disasters. I was in Palo Alto with my mother when the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 hit the San Francisco Bay Area. It, too, was a 7 point something earthquake. Houses collapsed, bridges were made unstable, elevated highways had to be torn down. The loss of life was 63. It was certainly the most serious earthquake I experienced in the twenty years I lived in California, but that meant it was the only earthquake in which things fell off shelves. My mother's condo building was built with thick, poured concrete walls. Her running water was never disrupted, and neither of us missed a meal.

Now you've heard often enough in the last few days that Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. Even without natural disasters, their regular situation is one of the most dire need. Earthquakes of similar intensity in Haiti and in Santa Cruz-Palo Alto-San Francisco: do you think that maybe the difference in the effects has anything to do with wealth and poverty? With the fact that one place and not the other has not only the will but the technology, the education, and the resources to build in a way that can withstand the effects of the earth's inevitable shaking? And do you think the distribution of technology, education, and resources might have anything to do with the distribution of wealth and poverty, and that the distribution of wealth and poverty across this planet may be a religious issue? We saw definitively with Hurricane Katrina

how wealth and poverty governs not only how people are affected by a natural disaster, but how also people are treated in the relief efforts that follow.

And that is the more immediate religious issue facing us, of course: how we respond to the situation. Given that God created a world he called “good,” but which evidently is not mechanically perfect, what do we do as God’s children when other children of God are suffering in such numbers? I still cannot believe that someone who calls himself Christian and a leader of Christians thought that the first answer to that question was to blame the people of Haiti. Because his voice is so powerful, I call all of us who are also Christians but have a completely different take on the subject to raise our voices so that we are not, once again, painted with the same humiliating brush.

Although our gospel passage today does not happen to highlight this aspect of Christ’s teaching, we all know that compassion and caring are central to the transformative vision he tried to convey to us. We all know that loving each other as friends, as he has loved us as a friend, is what we are called to do in our life of Christian discipleship. I know you will be as generous as you can be when our brothers and sisters in Haiti need our help so badly. Many of us have not recovered from the economic earthquake that began to shake us a year and a half ago. But we still live in a country where a Chinese immigrant widow can live in a building that is apparently better built than the palace where Haiti’s president lived, than the mansion where the archbishop of Haiti lived, than the house where the parents of the minister of tourism lived. We still live in what, even in a time of anxiety, is the richest society that the world has ever seen.

The abundance of the water that Jesus turns into wine seems to mock the story most on our minds this week, when millions of people cannot get access to simple, clean water, when scarcity and not abundance is the grim reality of the day. But if I can try to redeem the story of the wedding at Cana for us today, it is precisely in the fact that Jesus, as he does so often, creates abundance in the midst of scarcity. John is the only one who tells us the story of the wedding at Cana, but all the gospels tell us the story of the feeding of the multitude—some of them even tell it twice. Repeatedly, Jesus asks us to look at the problems of scarcity and abundance, and he asks us to question ourselves about our role in creating such abundance in some places and such scarcity in others. And he clearly clearly asks us to share from places of abundance into places of scarcity.

John tells us that changing the water into wine was Jesus first miracle. And much later in the gospel he will show us that the last miracle Jesus performs before his passion and death is to raise Lazarus from the dead. If the two miracles form a set of bookends to Jesus’ earthly ministry, I think that together they might tell us something John thinks is important: that whatever challenges and tragedies confront us, we should continue to towards the light, and towards life. I think he’s telling us that while death will always be a normal part of life, new life and renewed life is always possible in the face of death. Right now our brothers and sisters in Haiti need us to join with people around the world to make that message clear: that they are indeed our brothers and sisters, and that we are Christ’s hands and feet and heart for them, and that through our common bonds in Christ life will be renewed in the face of death and disaster. They need us to recognize our own abundance and to share with them at a moment when their need is even more dire than it is during normal times.

Please join me in prayer:

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, all who have none to care for them, and today most especially the people of Haiti. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*