

## **God's Extravagant Gifts**

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

John 2: 1-11

January 17, 2010

United Memorial

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

One of the things I do for worship preparation is to take some time every 5 or six weeks and plan the themes of worship.

I do this for a couple of reasons... it gives Glenn the time to choose an anthem that fits the theme and for the choir to learn it.

It gives me a chance to either look at the lectionary readings to see if there are overarching themes for a few consecutive weeks.

It gives me an opportunity to search for other readings, if I think that is more appropriate for us.

And it gives me the illusion that I have things under control... ;-)

A couple of things happened this week that took me in a very different direction than I had planned, even though they are still connected.

One, of course, was the earthquake in Haiti.

The other was the arrival of an advance copy of this little book entitled: There's No ATM in the Desert, to which I had been invited to contribute.

I had planned to talk about the extravagant gifts that God has given us as a way of getting us all to think of how our unique gifts can be used in this church and that we all have a part to play.

And that is still a part of this message.

Just as I talked with the children... we are all part of the picture that makes up United Memorial.

Each of us has a part to play in the ministry that is uniquely ours.

And without all the pieces, we are incomplete... we have incomplete ministry.

And so, I want to challenge and encourage each of you to prayerfully reflect upon what ministry are God is calling you.

Let's take a look at the readings...

In the Epistle reading, we find Paul trying to help the people of the church at Corinth sort out the how the Spirit affects their lives.

They have experienced ecstatic speech, and apparently have questions about it: Paul says they can know God's Spirit is at work if the speaker acclaims Jesus.

There are other gifts, as well, of which Paul proceeds to give examples.

His remarks could apply to a church, to a family, a committee, a group, and so on.

The church in Corinth was highly divided.

Its people were from very different backgrounds.

In 29 BCE, Corinth was chosen as the administrative capital of the province, the seat of the Roman proconsul.

The population of the city was Roman, Greek and other peoples, including Jews.

It was a rich, port city with all the vices and virtues that we know are inherent in a port city.

So, to this city, Paul writes to them about gifts... gifts of the spirit... unique gifts....

The gifts are not set apart....but are of the same spirit, Christ's spirit....

And the people are invited to use those gifts for the good of the community and to rejoice in those gifts.

The gospel reading is a wedding celebration!

In those times, weddings went on for days, sometimes even weeks.

It was a time not only of celebrating a wedding, but of cementing ties of kinship...

And in this midst, the wine runs out...

This account of Jesus first miracle operates on two levels...

On the level of a story... we could have questions about whose wedding it was... we could sympathize with the host... there could be some amusement thinking about Jesus obeying his mother when she brings to his attention that the wine has run out... and none of these aspects is unimportant.

But on another level we might have some insight into the nature of Jesus and thereby into the nature of God.

Wine poured out in abundance... just as Jesus life was poured out for us... in his living and in his dying..

Water transformed from ordinary to something more than it was...

Just as we are transformed into more than what we were by being touched by Jesus...

We in turn can be instruments of transformation for others.

By what we do, who we are, how we interact with one another.

God's love is extravagant... poured out like overflowing wine for us.

So what does this mean in the light of horrific hurricanes?

First of all, I think we have to leave behind the idea that hurricanes and natural disasters are an act of God.

They are an act of nature... and nature is not predictable.

And the devastation is compounded by homes and buildings that were not all that structurally sound... but that is not the fault of the Haitian people... if you had nothing to protect you from the weather, would you really care how it was built if the choice was between that and sleeping and living in the open air?

Haiti has been a troubled country for many, many years... and with this hurricane, we are called to be part of the healing and restoration...

We can pour God's extravagant love out in ways that bring hope.

What does this mean in a practical way?

To me it means that we can bring signs of God's love to people in Haiti... through extravagant gifts... of money... of prayer... or learning about Haiti.

There has been an outpouring of financial donations on-line through many worthwhile organizations... including the Emergency Fund of the United Church of Canada.

So many donations in fact that some of the servers were having trouble keeping up with the load.

This morning we are giving you an opportunity to participate by making an additional offering to our United Church Fund.

Remember a few weeks ago when I spoke about how God has given each of us gifts to share... that sometimes it is easier to look at what we don't have rather than what we do?

That includes financial gifts.

When the hurricane hit, I confess that one of my thoughts was, “I can’t possibly give any more money to a charitable organization.”

I just increased my offering to this church... and gave substantial donations to a couple of different charities at Christmas time.

And then this book came in the mail...

This is what is written on the back cover:

When we talk about money, it’s usually about what stuff costs.

But what about the significance of money in our lives?

What does our relationship with money say about our relationships with God, with others, and with the earth?

This book of daily devotions by diverse writers from across Canada invites us to consider biblical words about money and what they mean for us today.

And this is part of one of my reflections from the book.

It is based on the passage from Mark 6: 30-34

It’s the story of The Feeding of the Five Thousand

*Do You See What I See?*

*Appreciative Inquiry and Asset Mapping are two practices that are being used more and more often in church circles.*

*Simply put, they are ways of viewing our lives and our communities through a lens of plenty, which focuses on what we have rather than what we lack.*

*In other words, looking around and seeing the abundance rather than the scarcity.*

*I have often found it easier to identify what is lacking in my life rather than what I have in abundance.*

*When I fixate on what I don't have I become anxious, fearful and despairing; these things crowd out gratitude, trust and a sense that whatever I need, God has already provided for me.*

*My experience with faith communities has been the same, when we become focused on survival, we fail to see the abundance that is present.*

*It seems the disciples in this story were viewing the world through that same lens; all they saw was the problem of 5000 hungry people.*

*But, rather than offer them a solution to the problem, Jesus gives their concern back to them and says, “**You** give them something to eat.”*

*In saying this Jesus seems to be telling them to take another look at their resources... to discover for themselves what is right in their midst.*

*And what seems to be so meagre, five loaves and two fishes, with prayer and blessing, is multiplied into enough and more.*

*This passage also speaks to me about trust; can I trust that I will receive ‘my daily bread,’ and therefore share what I have rather than hoard it for another day?*

*My gifts seem so meagre at times.*

*But with prayer and blessing, Jesus enables me to share both bread and gifts and trust that they will be multiplied with God's help.*

*What are the resources you and we have right now?*

*How many times do we behave like the disciples and expect a solution to come from somewhere or someone else? (There's No ATM in the Desert – UCPH, 2010)*

*What are some of the resources that you and we have at our disposal to heal part of God's world.*

I made a choice to give to the relief effort in Haiti.

None of us has an infinite supply of money... and the money I chose to donate has an impact on how I live this month or the next couple of months.

It doesn't mean that I will go hungry... in fact, like many of us in North America, I struggle with excess weight.

God does not call us to share what we don't have... God calls us to share what we do have.

What it means is that I won't eat out this month, but how can I eat out with enjoyment when I know that that money could feed any number of people who are starving.

These stories from scripture can remain just stories written thousands of years ago...

Or they can be as alive as you and me...

The extravagant varieties of gifts...

The wine of transformation...

The bread of abundance...

So let us go forth from this place...

Sharing God's extravagant gifts with each other, our church and our world.

Thanks be to God for that opportunity, amen.