

*A sermon given on Sunday, January 17, 2010
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Stone Vessels and Transformation

Once I was at a retreat where, as an ice-breaker, everyone was asked, "If you were to describe yourself as some type of animal, what would you be?" People said things like, "I would be a dog, because I am loyal and friendly." Or, "I think I would be a squirrel, because I'm always busy dashing around." Or, "Right now I am most like an iguana, just dying to find a warm spot to sun myself!" And I thought, "Well, I guess I would be a sloth, because I have no interest in bothering with this stupid question."

It was a silly exercise, actually. But here I am, asking you just the same sort of question. Your question for today is: If you were to describe yourself as any type of vessel, or container, what sort of vessel would you be? A nice ceramic mug, perhaps, sturdy and reliable? A porcelain vase, elegant and refined? Are you a crystal vessel, thin and fragile? Or perhaps you are a Tupperware tumbler, practical and adaptable?

The vessels in today's Gospel lesson [John 2:1-11] are stone jars. Six of them. They were large vessels, awaiting use for the Jewish rites of washing and purification. Jesus, at a wedding in the town of Cana, is told by his mother that the wedding party has run out of wine. Somewhat reluctantly, Jesus has the jars filled with water and changes that water into wine. And not just any wine, but some really fine tasting wine at that! This is recorded as the first miracle which Jesus ever performed; the first indication he gave to those who had begun to follow him that his authority truly was of God.

What Jesus did in this miracle was to cause a transformation. He transformed the nature of what was in the vessels, he changed its quality. What Jesus did *not* do was to change the vessel -- he did not change the stone jars to into glass bottles or flacons of lapis lazuli. Nor did he change the basic element of the thing in the vessel. He was not like the magician who pours a pitcher of milk into his top hat, then reaches in and pulls out a rabbit. The stone jar started out with a liquid and ended up with a liquid. But the quality of what was in that vessel did change. Its nature was transformed. From something common, to something uncommon. From something that was easy to come by, to something rare. From something plain, to something potent.

The Spirit of Christ is able to do this. God's Holy Spirit is able to accomplish transformation. It is able to accomplish transformation not only in stone jars, but also within us. That which is within you -- your soul, your spirit, your selfhood -- can be changed by the Spirit of the Lord. It's not the vessel, of course, that matters. Jesus did not change those stone jars, but what was in them. Who we are is determined not by the vessel of our outside body, but by what is within us -- and that is where the Spirit comes to us. What God wants from me, who God wants me to be, I feel certain, has nothing whatever to do with whether I imagine myself to resemble somehow a vessel of ceramic, or crystal, or Tupperware. What matters

very much is what is in that vessel, and what comes from it. That is what God cares about. And that is where God comes to affect growth and transformation.

The impatient can grow patient; the anxious can grow calm. God's Spirit can do that. The unfocused can become clear; the uncommitted can become dedicated. God's Spirit can do that. The broken can be made whole; the alienated can be reconciled. God's Spirit can do that, too. The sorrowful can be made glad; the lonely can find solace. God's Spirit can do that. The clinging can be made generous; the indifferent made compassionate. Those unable to endure can be enabled to persevere; the weak can be made strong. God's Spirit can do that.

By prayer, by faith, by disciplined response to the gentle leading of the Spirit – in all these ways, the Spirit of God can enter us and work its transforming miracles, large and small. Just as in those stone jars, so also within the soul of the faithful: from something ordinary comes something quite extraordinary.

This week, all eyes have been on the disaster in Haiti. The images and tales of suffering are beyond imagining. We ache for the victims, and for their loved ones. We grieve for a nation already struggling for economic survival, now thrown into catastrophic disarray. Our Gospel today is about a miracle. In some ways, it almost seems too late for a miracle in Haiti. Yet in other ways, not. We pray for the miracle of Christ's resurrection to be an eternal reality for those who have perished. We pray for the miracle of courage for those who may yet be rescued. We pray for the miracle of strength to carry on, for the survivors; for the miracle of deep comfort for those who have lost loved ones. We pray for the miracle of strength beyond their own capacity for those who labor as rescue workers.

But here is one more thing about the miracle in today's Gospel story. The miracle, it seems, would not have occurred if the servants, who happened to be on hand, had not followed the instructions they were given. "Do whatever he tells you," said Mary. So they did. "Fill the jars with water," said Jesus. So they did. "Take the new wine to the steward," said Jesus. So they did. The miracle wrought by Christ was accomplished by two distinct actions: the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, and the perfectly ordinary work of the servants. Without the mundane yet faithful response of those servants, it appears, the miraculous transformation would not have taken place.

If we want to see something approaching a miracle in Haiti, then I suppose we must play our role. For some few people with particular skills, that may involve direct physical response and assistance. For most of us it will involve to more common yet vital forms of faithfulness: to give generously, and to pray earnestly. "Do whatever he tells you," said Mary. "Fill the jars with water," says Jesus. It's that simple. "Give," says Jesus. "Pray," says Jesus. It's that simple. And miracles depend upon it.

Today's Gospel message is that God's love for us refills the jars of our life. The Gospel says that we will never be beyond the care of Christ, and his ability to work the miracle of his presence within us. The miracle, the revelation, the epiphany in this story is that God stands by us in the empty times as well as full, and promises to transform us by his power. May that be so for the people of Haiti. And in responding to their plight, may it be true also for us.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.