

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

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The Wedding Invitation

In the late 1990's I travelled to Memphis, Tennessee, as part of my work on gang and gun violence with the federal prosecutor's office. The US Attorney in that portion of Tennessee was an African American woman, Ronnie Coleman, and she wanted to apply what we were learning here in Boston to the major violence problem in her city at that time: sexual assaults against women.

The most important, and memorable, part of my visit to Memphis during that trip was a tour I took of the National Civil Rights Museum, built out of the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King last stayed, and where he was assassinated. When you visit the museum, at least as it was then, you board an actual bus. Standing next to Rosa Parks you are angrily shouted to the "Back of the bus!"; you go on to explore different phases of Dr. King's extraordinary leadership; and then, near the end, you find yourself at the very room where he last stayed – a tray of half-finished coffee cups and a newspaper still evident, left behind... You conclude the tour by stepping out onto the balcony of the motel and see the rooming house nearby from which he gunshots rang out. You stand just where Dr. King did. The full power of his astonishing life and the unspeakable depth of the tragedy, cascades over you.

In the room where Dr. King stayed, you hear the song we just sang, playing low: "Precious Lord, Take My hand." It was Dr. King's favorite, the one he turned to again and again, for sustenance, for courage, for power. His very last words, on the balcony, were a request to have "Precious Lord" played that night, where he was to speak.

You see, that song plays, because undergirding all the amazing work Dr. King was able to do, was a deep and abiding conviction that he was *not* alone. That God *did*

walk with him each step of the journey, that God was alive within him, and within his many fellow marchers on that journey – even when others were blind to that. Most astonishing of all, Dr. King was convinced that God could live within his most vicious enemies, too. Dr. King refused -- *refused* -- to give up on his belief in the power of God's Love to transform *all* human hearts, the power of God's love to overcome the most entrenched hatred.

I've been spending time with Dr. King's speeches and sermons and books, collected in the large volume entitled, "A Testament of Hope." Time after time after time, that was his message: to students and sanitation workers, to white ministers who urged him to go more slowly and to other African American leaders who could see no way out other than violence, to the Nobel Prize Committee, and to the mourning parents of four little girls killed by a bomb while they were at Sunday School.

Consistently....relentlessly.... prayerfully, Dr. King spoke eloquently of a faith born from the Bible that never ignores the pain, the reality, the despair, *but* that teaches that sorrow and death are not the end of the story; that dark midnights are always followed by dawn; that the universe is held by a force of Love that will prevail, that we never are alone -- in our own little lives, or in our larger work for justice and peace.

What an astounding, what an amazing, what a completely -- ludicrous message!

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We are bright folks here. We're educated. We see the world for what it is. We worship in the heart of a troubled city, next to the shattered lives of Viet Nam vets at the men's shelter; nearly atop the State House, with its revolving door of corruption; near a gaping hole in the ground on Washington Street left empty because of a economy ground to a halt by human overreaching.

We know where the biblical messages are contradictory. We know how many purported miracles within the Bible can be explained by today's science. We know how these miracle stories have been misused to demand of tired souls a blind, unthinking faith that can sap energies rather than build them up. We've every right to be cynical; we're every right to look askance at preachers who hawk such rhetoric about a God whose love can transform us and our nation. Daily we see evidence of the opposite.

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So why do my arms still tingle when I hear Dr. King's words? Why is it, for so many years, when my own darkest nights have come, that I've also sung "Precious Lord, Take my Hand," over and over and over?

Why did I start singing that song when I was a woman in my 20's, sitting at a tin desk in Ashburton Place, next to the State House, and heard my husband's voice on the phone, saying his father had just died? Why did I sing it when I was a mother of young children, and would rush out of my office building in Post Office Square, running to catch the last express bus home to Newton, so I could gulp down dinner and read my children stories before it was time for bed? Why did I sing "Precious Lord" when I sat in the Parker House restaurant – just next door -- gamely nodding to others I knew, but torn up inside by an awful setback? Why did I sing it under my breath so many times in the Government Center T stop, as the trains screeched their way into the station and I clambered aboard?

Why do my arms tingle still at Dr. King's message?

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Because I've glimpsed the truth of it, time and time and time again. It *is* ludicrous -- and it *is* true. And it's a message that many, many of us, who walk past this place each day, are hungry to hear. That there *is* a Force of Love in the Universe holding us, loving us, in the words of today's psalmist, *delighting in us*, as couples getting married look at one another in marveling love.

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It is no mistake that the gospel writer John begins his story of Jesus' ministry with the story of a wedding. It's a story only John tells; I see it as his opening overture to an orchestral piece, John setting out the themes he will tell as the larger story unfolds, a metaphor for what he wants us to know.

Right away, almost abruptly, in today's gospel lesson Jesus and we are plunged into the middle of an ongoing wedding reception, probably the middle of a weeklong celebration that would have been the highlight of that village life. We know it's been ongoing, because the wine has already run out.

We are given no idea why Mary is involved in this problem-- is she meddling or has she been begged by the frantic hosts to help? Was she the one who'd been supposed to secure the wine? Was she to blame because Jesus and his new disciples are arriving with out RSVPing – we don't know, but BANG, we're instantly in the middle of a parent-child conflict.

I *love* this opening to Jesus' ministry. It's so human, so real. I'm sure you've never been part of a parent-child conflict, either as the parent or the child – but for the smattering of us who have been, the gospel writer instantly has us leaning forward, wondering how the story will resolve. We've been there. This is our life, too.

I'm also strangely comforted because Jesus himself is so human. He doesn't seem certain himself about what he should do. He declares that "his time has not yet

come," but almost on a dime, he turns and changes his mind. I sense in that abrupt reversal some hesitation, maybe even some fear in this man.

There has been a crescendo of anticipation in chapter one of John's story: John the Baptist declaring Jesus the Messiah; four disciples one by one joining on with Jesus. The first third of his entourage is in place, all of them are at the wedding party, the drum roll is playing, but will Jesus jump in to his bold ministry? It's as if he's climbed up on the high dive over a pool, and has his toes curved over the edge, trying to decide what to do.

It's a wonderful image for all of us, when we're considering a change, when we are trying to discern whether we should plunge into something new, some new ministry. This high pulpit bears an uncanny resemblance to a high dive for at least one minister I know well. A congregation discerning its new chapter of life in the city might also wonder how it should discern: go forward or wait?

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Jesus *clearly* does not want to be pushed in by his mother. For his decision to be the right one, it needs to be authentically his, as he listens for the voice of God within him. Neither Jesus nor we can be discerning our paths ahead based on the voices of parents we may have still embedded in our psyches. Our work of adulthood, and our work of spiritual deepening, is to be able to set aside some of the survival strategies we learned as children, and no longer be driven by old fears or demands. Many wonderful spiritual authors over the ages have taught this, from the Buddha to Jesus, to today's Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr. As our spiritual life deepens – as Jesus' had - we become freed to set aside our false selves and to live in the light of a God who loves us, and who dwells within us. We don't need to be driven by the need for others' approval, even our mother's. And while I might counsel *slightly* different words when one sets aside these parental voices – something a bit different from "Woman....." - it is important to the gospel truth that we learn to discern *God's* truth, and not mistake it for other voices that tug at us constantly.

My best guess, from the story, to explain Jesus' change of heart, is that he saw a real need that others had. There was a family without resources to adequately provide and they were humiliated. Where Jesus sees a gap between what is needed and what we have, Jesus enters. Into the places where we feel socially out of place and inferior, God always comes to stand next to us.

But significantly, there is one more essential piece. Jesus moves forward not just because he sees a need; he also moves forward now because, when he asks the servants of the house to help him, they do: he asks the servants to fill the massive water jars to the brim.

I've always been intrigued by this step in the process. Because what if the servants had declined to follow his odd request? I once wrote a piece about this, and

concluded that if the servants had chosen not to participate with Jesus, his ministry would have been postponed for another day. Because for God to minister to a people always requires our participation, too. Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa says it this way: God won't do it without us. We can't do it without God.

The servants – we servants – must be willing to work with Jesus. And at the wedding in Cana, somehow they were, even though they did not know -- at first – why Jesus was making this strange request to fill the massive jugs. Water in those jugs was for purification rituals, and by this time in the party, guests' dusty feet already would have been washed; their hands already would have been cleaned. There was no need for the jars to be re-filled to the brim.

But off the servants went, trusting that Jesus had some method to his madness. When I've been asked to bring more and more water in a village in Honduras, I've learned how back breaking this work would have been for the servants in that home, pulling up scores of heavy buckets at the well, or hauling them from the nearest river. I've wondered how long it took them, to fill 120 or more gallons up to the brim.

God's work with us, in this world, is a partnership – a covenant – like a good marriage. We need God, and God needs us, to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

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But oh my, when we participate with God – when the jars are full – there will be no end to our surprises. To the abundance we'll find. To the power of love in our lives, within our very own hearts.

We're transformed – we who once felt like ordinary water, feel our lives have deepened into the best wine ever served, fit for a marvelous celebration, and we want to share it! We are changed, and find that where there has been not enough, there is now far more than we need, overflowing the brim. We find we are gathered by God with others, in a place like this one, and are well fed with love, our deepest thirsts quenched. And there's a hope and a joy which is intoxicating. If you've ever met Archbishop Tutu when he has visited Boston, you find it in him – a man brimming over with humility and compassion, and *freed* by his conviction that he is loved by God to powerfully plead the case of the least and lost, clearly unhampered by worries about what others think of him, or about how futile his cause is.

You see, the real miracle is, that when we drink of the new life that God offers us, as when we drink of wine, our perceptions change, we let down some barriers. We see life itself differently, and we see one another differently. One author describes miracles this way, as our changed perception of ourselves and of others.

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One author described miracles this way: as our changed perception of ourselves and of others. In his book, Expect a Miracle, Dan Wakefield went to Lourdes, France, the pilgrimage site where many ill hope they may miraculously recover when they bathe in the waters. Wakefield did find some people who have experienced medically inexplicable healing. But what he most often found were miracles of transformation in how people *saw life*. Those who volunteered to bring the bodies of maimed and disfigured men and women into the waters, saw not deformities, but brothers and sisters. Those who had seen themselves as ugly, realized they are not.

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In our city today, far too many of us see ourselves, or others, as ugly, of body or soul. Some are heartbroken and some are hungry. Some have been rejected all their lives, and walk past this place with their eyes always cast low, at their shoes; others are so accustomed to power that they rarely see the faces of others, all just a blur as they rush past.

On this weekend, we honor one who *could* see life differently from the way it always had been seen. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pursued the absolutely ludicrous notion that non-violent love of his enemies could rip this nation from its tenacious commitment to racism. He saw a future when people would be judged by more than the color of their skin. Before we could even imagine it, he glimpsed a future where a black man could even be elected president of our nation.

Dr. King's new vision was predicated on a belief that God has invited *us all* to new life, to a wedding feast. Not just white folk, but all folk. Not just the people he liked, but his enemies, too. He knew that the road would not be easy, that victory was not assured him in his lifetime, but he believed that a day of feasting for all *could come*. He – a scholarly, brilliant thinker, a steel-eyed realist - was transformed by his faith in God, and he transformed us, and our whole country, because of it.

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Friends, in this place, in this city, miracles can take place. And already do! If we, God's servants, do our part, God promises to bring the transformation – of us, and of those around us. We *can* live life differently, convinced that there is love sufficient for us all, poured out and spilling over. We *can* overcome our fears, and take the plunge into this city, into our new lives, into a world where love is more powerful than hate, where all are valued as God's children, where empty hearts are filled to the brim.

Today we have a wedding invitation in our hands, with a reply card inside, already stamped. Will we come to the feast? I'm RSVPing Yes. Amen.