

FROM RELUCTANCE TO ABUNDANCE

JOHN 2:1-11

At the beginning of the week, thoughts of worship at UPC this morning excited me. UPC is a church that is not ashamed of its history during the Civil Rights Movement (because it does not have to be). We were for it then and are for it now. Hallelujah! Amen.

That's "amen," as in "so be it" not "amen," as in "Wake up. It's time to go." So it was. So it is. So I pray it will be forever.

I always will remember my first Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend in Tuscaloosa, because I felt empowered to proclaim the Gospel without being afraid of being reprimanded for being "indelicate" or being reminded of MLK's "indiscretions" (as a way dismissing God's call to social justice).

The Lectionary pitches a loofah-ball down-the-middle for the preacher to hit into the cheap seats on this particular Sunday: The Wedding at Cana (unless, of course, if someone preaches here, where marriage is a painful subject; some have had to go to Canada to affirm calls to marriage). Of course, it is impossible to spell Canada without Cana. It is the first four letters after all. Does this make Cana a four-lettered word (I suppose it come down to whether one believes that God is sovereign; if God is, then perhaps it is possible that God would call for same sex unions)?

An early draft of this sermon was called "The Same-Sex Wedding at Cana," but I decided against it, because it seemed appropriate to do more with Martin Luther King, Jr. (who, by the way, I think, would struggle with the issue of same-sex marriage).

Since I was not alive in the 1960s, I have to trust the stories of others, and there are many (though I have thought for a long time that everybody who says that he or she marched from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 did not, because the group would not have had to march if that many people belonged to the movement).

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, January 16, 2009*

The story of the Civil Rights Movement is something of a water-into-wine story in that there was a seismic shift in how a nation ordered itself, in how human beings related to one another and in how one defined his or her neighbor. Justice flowed like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, and I pray that they still flow so that the Civil Rights Movement always will be remembered as a beginning not an end.

I remember being excited on this Sunday one year ago, because the United States was about to inaugurate its first African American president, and regardless of what one thinks (or thought) of his politics, it is difficult to ignore the historical relationship between Obama and King. At the inauguration, The Rev. Joseph Lowery offered a benediction that began with the words of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”:
“God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou hast brought us thus far on the way; Thou hast by Thy might led us into the light; Keep us forever in the path, we pray.” Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

The path that this hymn describes is one from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberty and from sadness to celebration. It is one that leads from dryness to water and from water to wine (not unlike the one described in John’s Gospel).

At the Lectionary Bible study on Tuesday, John Whitehead and I riffed on one another as the group interpreted this story. I noted that the story refers to elements used in both of the sacraments that we, as Presbyterians, observe, and John remembered that when Jesus’ side is pierced later in this Gospel, blood and water flow. And just before Jesus is crucified in John’s Gospel: “A jar full of sour wine was standing there” (not unlike the six stone jars at the wedding at Cana). The Gospel of John is written more tightly than I ever thought.

So, on Tuesday, I thought that I had a sermon, especially when I read a commentary by Emory University/Chandler School of Theology Professor Carol Lakey Hess who waxes eloquently on the subject

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, January 16, 2009*

of “divine reluctance,” which actually reminded me of something that Annabel Stephens said at the Lectionary Bible study. Annabel’s first question after the story was read was: “Why does Jesus turn the water into wine?” And I said: “Because his Momma tells him to!”

Hess’ point is that Jesus’ reluctance matters. God is not an automatic wine dispenser. She explains that, “It may seem like a travesty to turn a narrative about divine abundance into a trial of God, and yet it is passages like this one about divine extravagance that makes God’s absence in the face of poverty, suffering and evil stand out.” She asks, “How do we reconcile a story of potent generosity with a world of tremendous need? If God is both generous and able, then apparently God continues to express Jesus’ attitude: what is that to me? Because we trust that God wants abundance (plentiful wine and lavish food are common symbols of God’s grace in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), we follow in the footsteps of the mother of Jesus by prodding God for divine compassion and generosity.”

Now I definitely had a sermon. I remembered stories about how Martin Luther King, Jr. was reluctant to assume leadership in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I remembered how he prayed for courage and strength as he faced resistance (in fact, one of these prayers was included for meditation at the beginning of the service). Like Jesus, King was unable to elude the question, “What concern is that to you and me?” What concern are human rights to you and me?

I went to sleep on Tuesday night feeling good about what I felt that God would have me say this morning. Then I woke up on Wednesday, and Haiti had crashed. Now we know that this is one of the ten deadliest earthquakes ever recorded. We know that at least 50,000 people have died, and there may be as many as 200,000. It has been encouraging to watch the world respond (even though much of the world has been reluctant to address poverty in Haiti until the earthquake).

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, January 16, 2009*

What concern is that to you and me? Obviously, we are concerned, and yet it is difficult to know how to respond. We watch. We are horrified, and we pray. We support the American Red Cross and give generously to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. We grieve. Six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification are empty. People have died and are dying. Where is the water? Where is the wine? Where is God midst the rubble?

God is with the people of Haiti, and God is with us. God created them, and God created us, and what is difficult to understand about a natural disaster is, "Why?" Injustice may be blamed on human beings (other human beings, not any one of us). War is the result of nations striving to impose their wills on one another. Poverty comes from an inability to share, but earthquakes? Why, O God, why?

Since I am not God, I am not able to answer that question, but I do know this: God will fill stone water jars in Haiti. God will fill them with water. God will fill them with wine, and God will fill them through the faithfulness of human beings. It may feel as if God is filling them reluctantly at times, but God will fill them, because this is what God does.

When the wine sours, God is standing there. When we are unable to take up our crosses, Christ is dying there. God is faithful when we are not: "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died; Yet, with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our parents sighed? We have come over a way that with tears has been watered; We have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till we now stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast." At the center of our faith, at the center of all our stories, is the hope of resurrection. Without it, we are lost. Without it, we will perish. With it, there is life and life abundantly. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

*Ron Gilmer, Pastor, University Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa AL
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C, January 16, 2009*