

SERMON: The Miracle of Transformation

January 17, 2010

PRAYER: Mighty God, your grace has power to transform even us into people of conviction and courage. Grant now that by your Word and Spirit our eyes may be opened to signs of your lavish grace in the midst of common life, as still today and in our own lives, you transform the water of our ordinary lives into the wine of your new creation; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

OT LESSON: Isaiah 62:1-5

NT LESSON: John 2:1-11

It was on a lovely spring day in April of 1968 that several of us who were students at Union Seminary went with Dr. John Leith to a conference at Duke on the “**Theology of Hope.**” Several years earlier a young Germany theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, had written a book entitled *A Theology of Hope*. In it Moltmann insisted that Christian hope is not a shallow optimism that clings to fleeting signs of progress in the daily news. It is a profound trust in the power of God to bring into being the future God has promised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As Christians we believe that the God who raised the crucified Jesus is Lord of the future. The drama of history does not end with a “bang or a whimper,” as T. S. Eliot put it. It moves toward the triumph of God's love in Jesus Christ. Trusting the triumph of God's grace, we are empowered to live here and now in light of God's promised future, looking forward in hope to the day when God will “make all things new.” A **theology of hope!**

As the Duke Conference convened, a number of thoroughly forgettable academic papers were presented. But then Harvey Cox came to the podium, and with his voice breaking announced, “*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been shot and killed in Memphis.*”

There was stunned silence in the auditorium. You could almost feel the air go out of the room. The whole tone of the conference changed dramatically. Someone, I don't remember who, led the conference in prayer. Brutal reality left academic papers in shreds. People headed back home as soon as they could. By evening Durham was in lock-down.

It was clear that day, and would be even clearer in the days that followed, that **authentic Christian hope** has nothing to do with our little dreams of progress. Any hint of optimism was shot down on that balcony in Memphis. Soon Dr. King's dream of a “beloved community” in which people would be judged more by the “content of their character than the color of their skin,” would go up in flames, as riots engulfed Detroit and Chicago and Newark, and so many other cities around the country. And we who had been so sure that we would “overcome someday,” were not so sure anymore. We had to ask ourselves--as we still ask ourselves today: Are our hopes merely wish-dreams that vanish in the light of day? Or is there a Reality powerful enough to transform even the water of our insipid lives into the wine of God's new creation, giving us hope and courage “for the living of these days”?

The story we read this morning from the Gospel of John speaks to that very issue. At first this deeply strange text may seem to have little to say to us today. But John sets this story at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry as a way of inviting us to read all the rest of the gospel in light of this **first witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ.**

On the surface, the story of Jesus turning water into wine looks like a fairly typical miracle story. But look deeper. In the Gospel of John there is always a deeper dimension to everything. Look first at **when** the story happens. “**On the third day...**” That could be merely a time reference. But not likely, not in John's Gospel. The “**third day**” is the day of **resurrection!**

Here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John is giving us a hint of what is to come. He offers us a foretaste of the glory that would come in all its fullness only in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For John the sign of Jesus' turning water into wine serves as a prelude to his whole ministry. John calls it the first of his "**signs,**" the inaugural act of Jesus' ministry. Changing water into wine is not just a miracle that happened once upon a time in Cana of Galilee. It is the ongoing miracle that continues to happen whenever and wherever the risen Christ meets us in common life and begins to transform our lives.

Not only is it on "**the third day**" that the story is set. It is at a **wedding in Cana of Galilee**. We are not told whose wedding it was. It doesn't matter. All we are told is that the **mother of Jesus** was there, and so was he and his disciples. What matters for John is that Jesus does the first of the signs that point to his glory, not in the temple in Jerusalem, not in a synagogue in Nazareth, but at a **common social occasion**--a wedding, where friends and family had gathered to celebrate the grace of life together. The grace of Christ is not confined to the sanctuaries in which we gather for worship. It impacts every aspect of life--even the most ordinary of social occasions. The living Christ has power to make every aspect of life sacramental.

It is on "the third day" at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, that a minor social catastrophe occurs: "**the wine ran out.**" We aren't told why. Perhaps more guests showed up than were expected. And these were poor people who didn't have that large a supply of wine to begin with. What's more, weddings in that culture were not just weekend affairs, with a rehearsal dinner and a reception after the service. Wedding parties generally lasted a full week. So for whatever reason "**the wine ran out.**"

It has been said that in the Middle East a wedding without wine would be almost unthinkable. And for the wine to run out would be all but **unforgivable**. It would bring shame on the bride and her family for years to come. John says that "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, '**They have no wine.**'" I suspect that was more than just a simple observation. It implied, "Do something about it, son. Don't just stand there and let our friends be embarrassed. Do something." Like what? Was she asking him to perform a miracle to keep the party going and save the friends from humiliation? Perhaps.

But Jesus' reply to his mother is surprising. It sounds insulting. "**Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.**" If I had spoken to my mother that way, she would not have been pleased...and I would still have the bruise. Why does Jesus reply to his mother that way? Most commentators don't believe that Jesus was being disrespectful of his mother. Raymond Brown, in his great two-volume commentary on the Gospel of John, says that this was "Jesus' normal, polite way of addressing women." (p. 99) Brown translates the words of Jesus this way. "**Woman, what has this concern of yours to do with me?**" It's almost as if he were saying, "**Not my problem, Mom. Not my problem!**"

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus does not respond merely to the urgency of our need. Even when his dear friend Lazarus dies, Jesus acts in accord with the purposes of God in his own time and in his own way. "**My hour has not yet come,**" he says. Jesus operates on his own timetable--not the urgency of our requests.

We are so used to thinking of Jesus as the man of boundless compassion, that we are startled when he acts for some reason other than to respond to our need. But that is exactly what John is saying here. Jesus is not just a "problem-solver." He is not in the business of getting us out of the messes we

get ourselves into. He is in the business of **transforming our lives** in accord with the purposes of his own redeeming love.

It is deeply significant that the first act of Jesus' public ministry, as John tells it, is a **miracle of transformation**--turning water into wine. Soon would come other, far more significant miracles of transformation, as twelve of the most diverse men you could imagine were transformed into a "band of brothers," soon to include sisters, who would turn the world upside-down and right-side up.

The early followers of Jesus were the best examples I know of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "**transformed nonconformists.**" In one of his sermons Dr. King spoke of the urgent need for people and institutions and churches who are willing to march to the beat of a different drummer—people who have the courage of their convictions and are willing to "put their feet on the street."

And yet, too often, King says, "most people, Christians in particular, are (more like) thermometers that record the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society."

"Called to be the moral guardian of the community," King says, "the church at times has preserved that which is immoral and unethical. Called to combat social evils, it has remained silent behind stained-glass windows. Called to lead men (and women) on the highway of brotherhood and to summon them to rise above the narrow confines of race and class, it has... practiced racial exclusiveness."¹

Much has changed since Dr. King spoke those words—much has changed for the better. The most recent poll from the Pew Research Center found that African-Americans' assessment of the state of black progress has improved more dramatically during the past two years than any time in the last 25 years. Portions of Dr. King's dream are being realized, for which we give thanks to God.

And yet for all the progress that has been made, we still have a long way to go in terms of race relations in our country. The same Pew poll, that found significant optimism on the part of African-Americans, did not find the same sense of progress on the part of Latinos. And most Presbyterian congregations are still predominately of one race or another. We still have a long way to go to realize Dr. King's dream of a "beloved community," and a country that, as he says, "lives out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men (and women) are created equal.'" There is still much that needs to change in the lives of us all. We need to drink deeply of the new wine of transformation that Jesus so lavishly provides.

Meanwhile back in our text for the day, as the story unfolds, suddenly we run into what Tom Long calls it "**a verbal speed-bump.**" Long says that if you are reading along in the text and suddenly come across a detail that seems out of place, it most likely is meant to jar you into paying attention to what you are reading. It's a way of saying, "Listen up! This is important!" Thump, thump!

John says there were "**six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons."** Six huge stone jars. The water in the jars was not for bathing. It was to be used for a ritual of purification before the meal. Each guest would dip his or her hand in the water as a sign of cleansing. In those six jars there was enough water to cleanse the whole village--indeed, as some have said, there was enough water to cleanse the whole world! John's point exactly!

But Jesus does not merely cleanse and purify. He **transforms! Extravagantly!** When the wine steward tastes the new wine, he is stunned that the bridegroom has saved the best to the last. And what a flood of wine it is--**120 to 180 gallons!** And this was not a large wedding party, to begin with. Even the St. Andrews Society of Upper State SC couldn't drink that much wine at a single sitting. This, I think, is John's way of saying that **where Jesus is, the miracle of extravagant transformation happens!** Life is transformed!

The early Christians were models of that kind of transformation. They took literally the words of the Apostle Paul, **“Do not be conformed by this world (or this age), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”** (Romans 12:2) Many of the first followers of Jesus willingly sacrificed their income, their reputations, even their lives for the sake of the gospel. They were small in numbers, but huge in influence. In only a matter of centuries they captured the Roman Empire for the cause of Christ. **“Transformed non-conformists.”**

What would it take for the church today to recapture the spirit of the early Christians of whom it was said that they “out-lived, out-thought, and out-loved” the world around them? I suspect that it would take no less than a miracle greater than turning water into wine. Everywhere the early Christians went they challenged the way things were. They refused to take part in the violence of the Empire. They cared for those who were rejected or abandoned. They transformed the world! And yet, gradually, King warned,

“the church become so entrenched in wealth and prestige that it began to dilute the strong demands of the gospel, and to conform to the ways of the world. And ever since the church has been a weak and ineffective trumpet making uncertain sounds. If the church of Jesus Christ is to regain once more its power and message, it must conform only to the demands of the gospel.”ⁱⁱ

That's a challenging, disturbing word to us all. What in Heaven's name would it mean to **“conform only to the demands of the gospel”**? I'm almost afraid to ask. But ask we must! In every age what the world needs are not tame, insipid Christians, but people who have drunk deeply the new wine of Jesus' transforming love and who are willing to live and die by it. That is the ongoing miracle by which the church lives or dies.

The good news of the gospel is that the Lord Jesus is able to take our timid lives and transform even us into agents of hope. He calls and empowers us to share in his ongoing work of transforming the world, until his kingdom comes and his will is done, on earth as in heaven. And so together, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we lean forward in hope, toward the day when justice shall indeed **“roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream....and the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”** That is more than just a dream...it is a **promise**, sealed in the blood of the Lord God almighty! To whom be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more.

Allen C. McSween, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

i. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transformed Nonconformists," in *Strength To Love* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964) p. 14.

ii. King, p. 15.