

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 ~ John 2:1-11

The Time is Always Right

January 16, 2022 ~ 2nd Sunday after Epiphany ~ Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

What is the story of Jesus really about? And how does this story relate to us today, as we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday in 2022? Today, as we see the death toll from COVID-19 in the USA climb to nearly 850,000 souls, with 1,984 daily deaths on average. Including today. Friends, as high as these numbers have become, and as often as we hear them repeated, Jesus calls us to remember these are not just numbers, they are souls with names, claimed and loved by God. Each one with a unique and beautiful face with eyes that cry, and a mouth that once smiled with joy. Here in this place, as we sang moments ago, God welcomes all. Here in this hour, we gather to regroup and recenter, to remember and lay claim to the one Spirit who creates, redeems, and animates all of us.

And yes, we are here to let what may be down to an ember of joy buried somewhere in our hearts, become an energizing flame that reveals the glory of the Lord. No matter how empty or depleted we may feel. Our quick dip into the Gospel of John and this inaugural story of Jesus' gifts being activated at a wedding, of all places, may be just the thing we need this morning! It's not so much about the wedding, we don't even know who was getting married. It happens at the banquet after the wedding which, by the way, in those days would have lasted not only for two or three hours—but an entire week! Seven days of feasting and celebrating. But this story isn't about the banquet. Really, it's about Jesus. And his fullness.

This story of the wedding feast in Cana is found *only* in the Gospel According to John, the last and latest of the four Gospels in our New Testament, written about 90 CE. This outlier Gospel has the least amount of story per square inch and' the greatest amount of metaphor and commentary. In John, the more you look, the more you see. In John, the things you can see and taste, like an abundance of wine, stands for something else. Something divine. Today's story is a feast for all discouraged hearts and exhausted souls.

With no birth announcement or birth story like we have in Luke; and no wisemen from the East offering three gifts like we have in Matthew; and the only gospel with no transfiguration story: the wedding in Cana event, serves as John's epiphany *and* transfiguration story all wrapped into one. We are given a glimpse, a glorious glimpse of who Jesus really is. We are given a vivid, tasty, juicy enactment of the gift Jesus has to offer. This is, if you will, Jesus' "coming out" story in John.

We are tipped off about the significance of this story, right out of the box with the opening phrase, "On the third day." What story does that light up for you in your heart? Yes, Easter people. We know that one. The one that also started in death and darkness, but did not end there. On the third day the tomb was empty and and the power of Love Divine victorious.

I think we could all use a little Easter glory to light up our hearts today, so I invite you to open your weary eyes in hopes of catching a glimpse and a glimmer of Jesus' glory revealed in this topsy turvy, over-the-top epiphany story as it is written in John 2:1-11

Sermon:

"The time is always right to do what is right." This is what Dr. Martin Luther King told the students of Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio on October 22, 1964. He was giving a speech titled, "The Future of Integration" to a capacity crowd and large radio audience. October 22 was very near the upcoming election, in what had been a bloody year in American history. There had been riots in at least six American cities and the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. And so these words that he said later in that speech, are painfully significant, "It is true that behavior cannot be legislated and legislation cannot make you love me, but legislation can restrain you from lynching me, and I think that is kind of important."ⁱ He was calling these young people to exercise their call to activate the gift of democracy by voting. He believed the greater the turnout, the greater the chance the vote would turn the tide of hate and violence of 1964 into something more, something better.

The time is always right, to do what is right. The time is always right to turn emptiness into fullness. We learn about that, we see that happen the wedding party in Cana. The story that begins for us, when the wine gave out. This story begins with emptiness. The wedding party threatens to come crashing to a halt. But, the mother of Jesus is there. As we are told in the first sentence of this story, right after the opening phrase, "On the third day." It is Mary who will not let that happen. It is she who knows that Jesus has the gift to turn this around. The gift of turning emptiness into fullness, disaster into delight. That is the heart of the story.

Perhaps that is why we don't know who was getting married, or why Jesus, his mother and recently recruited disciples had been invited and chosen to attend this wedding. Not important. Instead, we receive an enormous amount of detail about the six empty stone water jars: their dimensions, their purpose, who would fill them. Each jar had a capacity of 20 to 30 gallons. Picture the size of your outdoor garbage can, typically about 30 gallons. They were likely empty because the large wedding party had used all the water they had contained to cleanse and purify themselves before the wedding. Now picture them filled with wine. Six, thirty-gallon garbage can size jars of wine. That is a crazy large amount of wine. Even in Wisconsin.

There is an important gap in the story that I want us to consider. It might be the gap that is the key for you and me. The gap that turns water into wine; emptiness into fullness. Mary says, to Jesus, "They have no wine." Jesus doesn't say, "right mom, good call, I'm on it!" Initially the text tells us that he pushes back. The words on the page, even two thousand years later jump out as confrontive and not particularly tender, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." We can talk about how he used the term "woman" to address women when he was getting ready to say something important. We can understand he was referring to the hour of his passion. However, even with all that, it still a rather petulant response

that leaps off the page, particularly in John's portrayal of Jesus. And so it calls our name as readers and interpreters of scripture and says, "Look at me."

The more you look the more you might agree that something seems to be missing from the printed page, between Jesus' basically "no mom, not now," response and Mary's direction to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." We can only guess the thing that is missing from the narrative is a look, a glance from mother to son. You know the look. When your mother tells you to do something—and does not back down. Mary was activating her spiritual gift of knowing her son could do something and it was time for him to do it. The time was right. Somehow, Mary knew. She had the gift of timing. She knew it was the perfect time for Jesus to reveal his glory.

There was another woman whose name started with "M" who lived about 2000 years later. She had many gifts, best known, perhaps, for her singing voice and her soulful renditions of gospel music that thrilled hearts and lifted spirits the world over. But the gift that links her to this story of Mary pushing Jesus to do something miraculous about the wine problem, was her gift of timing and her gift of hearing the Spirit work through her to prompt a man whose name also began with "M" on August 28, 1963. Yes, I'm talking about Mahalia Jackson and Martin Luther King, Jr. on the National Mall, on stage with the other speakers and performers, all drenched in sweat in front of 250,000 people at the March on Washington. Dr. King had been following the script he had labored over, the script that others had helped to write and edit for his 5-minute speech, the final speech after a long program. In a few words, it was his job to bring the message home. But while he was speaking from his prepared speech Mahalia, sitting behind him, while he stood at the podium said, "Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!"

And then it came. Unscripted, spontaneous, preaching poured forth. As one of his speech writers reflected years later, "no one on the Mall knew at that moment they were in church and about to get a sermon." If Mahalia had not pushed Martin to share this "sermon" what has become one of the most important speeches in the history of our country, what we now call the, "I Have a Dream" speech would not have happened. Not then and there, anyway. Mahalia had heard him talk about this dream before, and she knew the time was right to activate it: Dr. King's vision and his gift to our nation and to the world. As gifted an orator and preacher as Dr. King was, if Mahalia had not pushed him at that moment, this speech would not have ended as it did. Likewise, we know Jesus was and is the Son of God, but if Mary had not pushed her son, that miracle in Cana would likely never have happened.

Here's my question for each of us this day: What is the look that God is giving you? What gift are you holding back? Maybe you feel like you are not ready. Maybe you feel like you need to stay on the original script of your day or your role in a particular setting. Or maybe you are afraid or unsure what would happen if you really let your gift loose in your personal relationships, your work environment, your role as citizen and your civic duty. What do you have to offer, what does God want to activate for the common good? None of us has all the gifts or all the answers. Not by a long shot. But God gave each of us a part, just a small part, one piece

of the puzzle to work together to reveal God's glory to all. All the pieces are equally important and valued. That's what Paul is trying to teach the conflicted, divided, yet exuberant church in Corinth in the first scripture lesson we heard today.

This is an important question for us as a church, too. What is the look that God is giving us, as the body of Christ we call FPC? What are the gifts that we have been given and are being called to activate for a time such as this? In the year 2022, a time we have never been in before. And a time we will never have again. Each generation must find its mission and fulfill it. A mission that lifts the life of everyone. The God who came to us in the form of a human being named Jesus, is the God who wills joy for all creation. Like our story in Cana, Jesus turns water into wine for everyone. It is a story of joy and of abundance, not for some, but for all. When it comes to doing justice, when it comes to loving kindness, the time is always right to do what is right. No matter the cost.

Just before Dr. King was assassinated, his disapproval ratings had risen to 75%, according to a Harris poll. He had broadened his prophetic message of justice beyond the bounds of racial injustice, to address the injustice of systemic poverty. And he went beyond domestic issues to speak out against the war in Vietnam. His message pushing against the status quo was making people uncomfortable. Perhaps they were saying, "the time is not right."

We are not called to be popular. We are not called to follow the crowd and hope things will get better. We are called to follow Christ, whose Divine Love never ends, and will never run out. We are called to activate the spiritual gifts that God has given us. Not later. Not down the road, but now. Who knows, perhaps this very story inspired the Rev. Dr. King to teach us all: *The time is always right to do what is right.*

ⁱ <https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/MLKmainpage.html>