

THE BEST FOR LAST

First Congregational Church – Oshkosh, WI

Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 17, 2016

Timing is everything. Some might say, timing is the only thing. In the Gospel of John we read that curious story of Jesus' *first sign* as John called it. The scene is set when Jesus' mother, Mary, comes and tells him that the wedding in Cana, near Nazareth, in Galilee is running dangerously close to running out of wine! Weddings in those days lasted several days. They were not the brief preludes to huge receptions at the local civic center or hotel like they are today. The custom was that the host of the wedding party, expecting the most important people to come first, served the best wine at that time. Then, as the festivities continued to the second or third day, lesser wines were served.

Jesus, his mother, as well as his disciples, were not really included among the more important guests who had come earlier. They were lesser folk who were supposed to come later with the *hoi polloi*! Mary may have arrived a little earlier than Jesus for when she comes to tell him that they have run out of wine the implication in the story is that he is to be among the last guests to have been invited to the party.

When Jesus hears her tale of woe regarding the wedding he acts as though he could care less about the wine steward's problem. Yes, it

would be embarrassing if guests were still arriving and there was no wine to be served. Yes, the accident in planning on the part of the bridegroom hosting the celebration, or his servant's miscalculation, could set an unwanted precedent in Cana's social world. It could cost the wine steward his special position of employment. But, what was that to Jesus beyond an amusing story to tell perhaps later on to his followers about the harrows of being unprepared?

Shortly after Jesus' arrival, and despite his nonchalance about the *crisis*, Mary tells the servants to do whatever He tells them to do. Jesus looks around and instructs them to fill six empty jars with water. Water! Later, they dip a cup in one of the jars and hand it to the steward. He tastes it and immediately praises the bridegroom for saving the best wine for last! Something unheard of in those days.

John seems to me to be stating to those who read this story that certainly the best wine would not be served until Jesus arrived. He is, whether the bridegroom recognizes it or not, whether those attended the wedding festivities do or not, whether all of Cana's society understands it or not, the most important guest. And, he has come last! By the end of this first story, the writer has stated his Gospel's sole demand: *Believe in this person or live in darkness forever*. John tells us no more of Jesus' will for us than this: *Believe that I am and love one another*.

Both the Old and New Testament texts today emphasize that God's timing is not our timing. God's ways are not our ways. Isaiah's text encourages readers with a sense of anticipation, predicated on God's promise of salvation for Zion. John's text invites us to think in future terms also, especially with Jesus' statement to his mother, *my hour has not come yet* – a theme that appears later in the Gospel after the authorities tried to arrest him but *no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come*.

Orson Welles, when he was reduced to performing television commercials for Mogen David in the 1970s, was depicted as standing before a Grecian portico, holding a glass of dark wine in his hand while Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was heard as background to his thunderous voice. "We will sell no wine before its time," he said as he lifted the glass to his lips. The theme of waiting for God's perfect timing is sounded many times in Scripture. God saves Zion, turns water into wine, distributes spiritual gifts to the church, all in due time – never, "before its time" as Orson Welles might have said. The ancients understood this well. In the Greek language they taught there were two kinds of time: chronological (hour by hour, day by day) and kairotical (that point where something happens that is so pivotal human history turns for the better or worse). Kairos and Cronos cross at those moments. John's

Gospel teaches that Jesus came from God's time into our time. That crossing is so important. We ought not to miss it.

This weekend we are remembering the life and gifts of Martin Luther King, Jr, a southern black preacher who was able to speak and act in such a way as to change the course of American history. Few Americans knew of him outside the South and the struggle for Civil Rights in our nation prior to August 28, 1963. But, after that day, everyone it seemed knew who he was and the cause for which he stood.

Twenty-two years prior to that day A. Philipp Randolph, who headed the Pullman Workers Union, threatened to organize a march on Washington during F.D.R.'s fourth term as President in protest of low wages for black workers, lack of jobs and general poverty in black communities across America. Roosevelt headed this confrontation off by issuing several executive orders that raised wages, and began to build affordable housing much like Mrs. Roosevelt's efforts for poor whites across the land in the Homestead project. Then, WWII came along five months later. Suddenly black workers were needed for the war effort and things cooled for twenty years.

By the summer of 1963 the Supreme Court had ruled separate but equal public education was not legal (9 years earlier), and the U.S.

armed forces had been integrated (even in housing on bases), and the South was embroiled in various sit-ins, law suits, demonstrations, and conversations regarding Jim Crow laws that would not sustain the challenges of the courts. Equal accommodation was the talk of the day for all public places. That was the South I grew up in – separate water fountains and rest rooms in public squares; separate places to sit in theaters (blacks always in the upstairs balcony, last two rows); backs of buses; and no accommodations in restaurants for blacks (even the National Park Service’s famous Sky Line Drive in Virginia and Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and Tennessee had a separate restaurant for blacks and separate restroom facilities)! There was massive discrimination in housing and jobs.

I had the advantage, I guess one would say, of growing up less than a block from the black ghetto in our hometown. I delivered papers in that section of town as a boy of nine years of age. We kids got together regularly to play sports like touch football and baseball. Some of us even played basketball in the Black High School for it had the best gym! Wheaton Park, in the black section, had lights for its baseball field and we played there almost every Sunday evening in the summer to the delight of the black community who came to watch. When I went to college Leon Brumback, the other forward on our basketball team, was black. Going around the south to play teams on the road was always a

challenge because restaurants wouldn't serve Leon (even in the Nation's Capital), and motels wouldn't offer him a room! Something had to give.

On August 28, 1963, when over 300,000 marched on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a march planned by a combination of Civil Rights groups and labor unions, I went to Washington on a bus with folk from the newly formed NAACP of Lancaster, PA. Another seminary classmate and two professors also went to protest alongside of America's Civil Rights and religious leaders. It was a very warm, sunny, day as only it can get in that swampland along the Potomac River.

The day dragged on, after we marched up Pennsylvania Avenue and stood alongside the reflecting pool that stands between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial listening to a panoply of entertainers, legislators, religious leaders speak to the issues that had perplexed the nation regarding race and poverty since the Civil War. As the afternoon dragged on the masses were restless and tired. Some had fainted due to heat exhaustion and lack of proper hydration. I had removed my light suit jacket, loosened my tie, and stood as attentively as I could while my body complained of the stress and rigor of the day that had started for me at 5:30 am.

Peter, Paul and Mary were singing “If I Had a Hammer,” and folk were trying to sing along. Then, Ozzie Davis, who along with his wife Ruby Dee were acting as emcees for the day, was introducing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He explained that Martin would be the last speaker for the day before we would be invited to recite the pledge to continue in the struggle prior to boarding our buses, trains, and planes to go back home. A stillness swept over the restless mass and then a roar of the crowd seemed to rise at the steps of the Memorial and sweep out across the mall to where I was standing. We could hear but couldn’t see whether King was there or not.

Suddenly there came that soft yet distinctive voice, dressed in the cadence of Southern preaching, addressing the shortcomings of American justice as regards the black and the poor of the land. It was as if everyone had more energy with each sentence. There were breaks in his speech when the crowd yelled their approval. Behind him several could be heard saying, as is common in Southern churches every Sunday, “Come on now...preach it...well...amen....” As they punctuated his speech it seemed as if his voice gained courage and each word was spoken with more assurance.

After all the others, the planners, who almost didn’t invite this young preacher to speak for fear of how the nation’s TV audiences

might react, were revealed to be geniuses for saving his talk to the end. It was as if he were the prophet to our nation. He pointed to the needs for justice and righteousness to flow like a mighty stream! When he revealed his dream with which he would go back to the South that day, I can tell you there was hardly a person in that crowd who would not have walked with him for he pointed to the reality of the struggle, called for us to affirm the need to witness non-violently, and quoted an old negro spiritual with such grace that tears welled in many eyes. Here was the best hope for our nation. Here was a man of God who could speak to all of us: black or white, Christian or Jew, Catholic or Protestant, whoever we were on life's journey!

There is so little to remember of anyone, anecdote here or there, a faded picture, the fall of a sleeve on an anonymous afternoon, wrote Marilynne Robinson, in her first novel entitled *Housekeeping*. *We live with that same hope that the lost, whose absence we always deeply feel, will come walking through the door and touch our hair with habitual, dreamy, fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long.*

No matter how we frame it, we know whenever we are in the presence of the best. We know when God's time intersects our ordinary time. We know when it is really time to pay new attention to old duties and commit ourselves anew to a discipleship that will make a difference.

We know adulterated speech. And, we know when what is said is so riveting it sounds as if God were speaking. There is no mistaking such a time. I can't explain why it comes when have just about given up, when we are so tired we can't move another muscle, when we are so weary we just want to go home and forget about it. All I know is this: it does come. And we say to ourselves like those guests in Cana so long ago, why they have saved the best for last! I am glad I am here for it.

Amen.