

John 2:1-11 Epiphany 2

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace; may that grace be with you. Amen.

When my son Erik was four or five, his Sunday school teacher gave him a book about Jesus' miracles. The book was scripturally correct and certainly well-intentioned, but I have to say it was the most boring book about Jesus imaginable. The reason the stories did not land for me (I won't try to speak for Erik) is that they were divorced from their context, making them seem more like magic tricks than miracles. Friends bring a disabled man to Jesus, and Jesus makes him walk, check. Jesus comes across a blind man outside of Jericho, and Jesus makes him see, check. Tasked with finding a good Cabernet, Jesus turns water into wine, check. More like a harried bureaucrat than the Son of God.

I tell this curmudgeonly tale on myself because it helps me ask the question: what *is* the purpose of a "miracle"? Surely in our experience not everyone who needs a miracle gets one. Not everyone wins the lottery right before the rent is due. Not everyone's beautiful child is cured of cancer. Either God is a petty tyrant, OR a miracle functions as something other than a last-ditch bypass of the natural order. Something else is going on.

The different gospels handle the phenomenon in different ways, but for John, a miracle is a sign that points to God. After the thousands are fed loaves and fishes, Jesus warns that we shouldn't get so caught up in the bread that we fail to eat and experience the Bread of Life. We shouldn't mistake the compass arrow for the North Star itself. [The miracle, the sign, is not the important thing!]

Today's gospel lesson is the third of several classic Epiphany texts when God's glory shines out from behind the veil, showing out what has been hidden. Last week we heard about the magi and the star. This year we skipped over the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan when God's voice claims the Beloved. And today, as Jesus reluctantly begins his public ministry as told by John, he reveals his identity in God as a continuity of this grace.

Water—somehow—becomes wine. Who do you imagine is the intended audience for this miracle? For whom is Jesus manifesting a sign? I

mean, yes, he acts on behalf of the party's hosts, sure. Wedding feasts in Jesus' context lasted seven days, and hosts were meant to provide lavish food and drink for their guests, so Mary's concern about the wine running out may suggest that the hosts are relatives or close friends. In this sense it's hard not to see Jesus' action as a matter of expediency. OK, Mom, if you insist.

But . . . who gets to see this epiphany, this shining forth? That would be the servant class. When the partygoers have become drunk enough that they can't tell the difference between box wine and Stags' Leap, the bustling servants know. The ones who need something to believe in. The folks for whom the wealth and abundance all around them seems like a cruel joke from which they are excluded. They are the ones who get to see the water, which they ladled gallon by gallon into stone containers, they get to see this water turned into wine.

Six water jars, 20 to 30 gallons—120 gallons is a lot of wine! But how funny that no one but the servants and the disciples know or care where it comes from. For everyone else, this transformation remains hidden, unseen. Only the ones who need the sign perceive its unveiling.

And as a sign this event points beyond itself to the deeper reality of who Jesus is. Not to be told who Jesus is, but to encounter him. Not to hear about the source of transformative grace, but to experience it. For if Christ has the power to change elements like these, we too might be utterly transformed. Eternal life, life overflowing, begins now.

As I implied a moment ago, though, Jesus doesn't seem altogether thrilled at being thrust into the limelight yet. "My hour has not yet come," he protests. "My power is not about expediency." It reminds me of C.S. Lewis's famous pronouncement about Aslan, the Christ-figure in the Narnia books. "Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's not a tame lion, you know."

If you need further proof, his very next act will be to cause a ruckus in the Temple. Beginning in chapter 2, verse 12, he makes a whip and drives out people and the sheep and the cattle, overturning the tables of the money changers. What do you suppose the pundits of our day would say? Jesus practiced civil disobedience. Would they focus on his message, or criticize his methods? He may have advocated for turning the other cheek, but he is

not a tame lion. Right? He is not at the beck and call of anyone, including those of us who would interpret his actions for a contemporary world.

We may have a similar tendency to domesticate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As we mark the federal holiday in his name, he begins to seem perhaps like a mild grandfatherly figure whose goals have been achieved. He never made it to 40. While the movement he helped to lead stood for nonviolence, it was contested by firehoses, dogs, firebombs, and police batons. Long before Memphis, King survived a 1958 assassination attempt that nearly ended his life.

Moreover, he didn't "stay in his lane" as a desegregationist, but weighed in on matters pertaining to all people. In some ways, I think this is what really offended people about him, that he wasn't content just to be a figure of inspiration for Black people but had things to say about, for example, the war in Vietnam. He assembled the Poor People's Campaign, a multiracial coalition to advocate for economic and human rights. On the eve of his assassination, he showed up in support of a sanitation workers' strike. He wasn't a tame lion either.

King lived long enough to see some of his goals accomplished, while others still remain to be met. If we make him into an anodyne symbol for things already achieved, we're doing it wrong. His belief that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" carries a word of hope, real hope, but also demands courageous attention to that arc and its bending.

King was not perfect. He was not Christ. But he was an exemplar of how imperfect people can aim to follow Christ. And how ordinary people can draw others to Christ. At his funeral, a recording of his last sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church was played:

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

To me the question of the day, of the week, of this lifetime, is: what does loving people look like in a world where people can be difficult to love? But also, what does loving people look like in a world where that love, that action, is so urgently needed? That, in its way, is the real miracle. That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That God's love is so indomitable that not even death could kill it.

Óscar Romero, another martyr for the cause of love, had this to say about it. "Let us not tire of preaching love, for this is the force that will overcome the world. Even if we see waves of violence coming to drown out the fire of Christian love, love must win out. It is the only thing that can." I don't doubt that Dr. King would agree.

We continue to pray for miracles, because we continue to believe that God shows up in our lives, transforming all that is broken and distorted. We are the ones who need these signs pointing to love. Amen.