



SUNDAY SERMON

Transformation

This is a ramble of a sermon, but with one theme. I composed it in a hurry after Ledlie's phone call to me on Friday morning. Ledlie's father is dying after a long illness, and Ledlie needed to get to CT and be with his family before a major storm hit there, starting last night.

This sermon will roam from the gospel story of the water changed to wine at the wedding at Cana, to the great work and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow, to the wildly popular musical "Hamilton" and finally to Mary Oliver, the poet beloved by so many, who died on Thursday. The single theme, connecting these widely ranging thoughts, is Transformation. To transform is to change the nature, function or condition of something, to convert, according to one dictionary.

First the wedding at Cana. It's one of the great Bible stories! As social commentary it's terrific - the wine running out at a wedding is indeed an embarrassment, even a disaster, not just then, but now. And when the new wine, changed from water by Jesus is served, a steward comments to the bridegroom that most hosts serve the best wine first and save the lesser wine for later, after the guests have become drunk. The steward is amazed that this last wine is even better than the first. This could be today - don't we lead with our best wines, saving backup bottles for later? Or maybe not, maybe we save the best for later, for ourselves - but that's another sermon!

And as a little psychological drama, this story is great too. Jesus' mother, noticing that there is no more wine, goes straight to her son. She's a good Jewish mother, after all, and wants him to do the right thing and fix the problem. And, as sons sometimes do when their mothers get a little overbearing, Jesus rebukes her, "My time has not yet come," he says, almost a "mind your own business!" But then, perhaps feeling guilty about disappointing his mother, Jesus does indeed step in and pull off what John tells us is his first sign, he changes water into wine.

But let's put social and psychological interest aside, and get theological. We don't know for sure what John is up to here except to portray Jesus as extraordinary by having him perform a miracle, and he tells us this led Jesus' disciples to believe in him. So what is this story about theologically? I believe it's a transformation story, a story about power that can bring about change, power that can make things better than they are, power that can work through our humanity to transform the world.

continued

DATE

Epiphany II
Sunday, Jan. 20, 2019

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

John 2:1-11

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And so how fitting that on this Sunday when we honor the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. we remember him as the change agent that he was. King's preaching and activism and non-violent resistance transformed this country. From the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery through the March on Washington and until his murder in 1968, King, through the power of his words and insistence on meeting hatred and prejudice non-violently, transformed the landscape of racism and segregation in this country. And for King, love was the deep down, bedrock source of transformation. He said this "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy to a friend." And Martin also knew, from his own experience, that change can come only when brave people step away from what is comfortable and step up to what is needed. He said, "There comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right." From the cold empty stone jars of centuries of racism, King filled the hearts of millions with the rich new wine of justice, leading us to a better place than before.

Today we are far from done with the evils of racism, and the need for leaders to step up to what is right because it is right is as urgent as ever. We need new wine in our body politic. Cold stone jars of empty promises are no good; and depriving workers of their pay as political gamesmanship is shameful. We need the justice that King called for; we need the power of love to transform our divisions over so many things that we all actually care about. As Cornel West said, "Justice is what love looks like in public." We need this kind of love, new wine to quench our aching thirst for leadership we can trust and a government that can function for the benefit of all citizens. We need the kind of transformation that Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied.

Another kind of transformation is forgiveness, and here's where "Hamilton" comes in. Alexander Hamilton deeply hurts his wife Eliza when he not only has an affair but writes publicly about it to excuse himself from accusations of embezzlement. Their marriage becomes a cold empty stone jar, a well of anger and resentment. And then, adding to their misery, is the death of their oldest son in a duel - utter devastation. But when the Hamiltons move uptown, a slow transformation happens over weeks and months of going through the motions of life, of long walks, first alone, then together. As the song "Unimaginable" goes,

There are moments that the words don't reach
There is a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable
They are standing in the garden
Alexander by Eliza's side
She takes his hand
Forgiveness. Can you imagine?
Forgiveness. Can you imagine?
If you see him in the street, walking by her side,
talking by her side, have pity
They are going through the unimaginable

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Forgiveness can and does happen; it is an amazing gift of grace, cold empty stone jars of love, so damaged and battered, filling with wine, aged and rich and satisfying as sometimes the best of marriages can be. When has forgiveness happened to you, or when have you found it in yourself to forgive, and didn't it somehow feel like a miracle? We may think we can never get there, and yet love, or we might say God, gets us there.

Finally, Mary Oliver. She is one of the most popular and accessible poets of our time. She is a nature writer, a religious writer, a passionate lover of the world in all its concrete splendor and suffering. Yet she sees beyond it to glory and to newness and to the transformation that lies at the heart of living and dying. She writes of this in her poem, "When Death Comes"

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes
 all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

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Gracious God, fill the cold empty stone jars in our lives, our hearts, our communities, with new wine. Change whatever insipid water gets in the way of change for justice, gets in the way of transformation by forgiveness, and in the way of fullness of life; change these into wine. And may the wine of your presence, new every morning, be sweet and good and strong, that we and our world may be the better for it. Amen.