

St. Paul's Congregational Church
January 27, 2019 – Epiphany 2C
John 2:1-11: For the Good of All
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

A friend of mine who graduated from seminary just last year wrote in his blog this week, “I’m having a bit of a hard time right now. I’m struggling. I’m unsure of myself. I don’t know what to say. The reports of the effects of the government shutdown – the stories are gut-wrenching and heart breaking and frightening. And I have to preach on Sunday. I’m supply preaching this week – I turned in my bulletin on Tuesday afternoon – it has been copied by a very efficient church secretary already. I’m locked into preaching the gospel lesson from the lectionary – the wedding at Cana. My dilemma is this, how to link the passage about Jesus’ first sign (miracle) to a message of compassion/hope/call to action. And it is also the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day.”

I’m sure he isn’t alone in his dilemma – it has been quite a week indeed. And as I’ve been immersed in the events of the week, all the emotions of the week, I’ve eventually come to realize that this passage really does have something to say to us in the world we live in today.

The themes of timing and abundance intertwine in this story from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus has not yet begun teaching and working wonders among the people, yet his mother has confidence that he can help when a crisis arises at the wedding of a friend. In the story, John provides us a glimpse of Jesus and his mother as human beings who had friends, who partied, and who fussed when something went wrong. Jesus, a young man having a good time with his friends, even appears to balk at leaving them in order to solve someone else’s problem. The exchange between Jesus and Mary may sound familiar to the parents among us who ask a child to do something – from moving a bike left in the driveway, to cleaning up a room, to helping with household chores – not now, Mom. Not me. And yet Jesus does indeed respond to the need at hand after hesitation, showing ordinary compassion for the hosts who are in a terrible predicament, but his response, his action, is anything but ordinary.

It’s important to note here – while running out of wine may not seem to be of crisis proportions to us today, and no matter how much we appreciate hospitality today, the people of Jesus’ time practiced hospitality

as a survival skill, a way of looking after one another in a hostile and perilous environment, and an assurance of being looked after in return.

Here was my first connection: a survival skill in a hostile and dangerous environment – look at the number of food banks that have opened to help folks who can't afford to buy food for their families after missing two paychecks! Soup kitchens are opening - so many of you have asked, what can we do? Gifts cards are being donated, food donations are up. That's hospitality, isn't it. That's stepping up by communities and individuals in a time of crisis.

Back to the story of the wedding: doesn't Jesus' response in the beginning sound modern, even familiar, to us: what's it to you and me? But the second part of his answer sounds much more solemn: my hour has not yet come. Don't we wonder if Mary questioned what her son meant by that? Whatever she may have thought, though, she wanted to make sure there's wine for these poor folks, for everyone's sake. And it turns out that timing, no matter how important and Jesus knew it was, takes a back seat to human need at that moment, as it would throughout all of Jesus' ministry.

It's in that moment of need that the reign of God breaks in – at an unexpected time, at an unexpected place. Human need comes first! And here we have the first of Jesus' miracles.

There's also the theme of abundance in this story: the response to the everyday but immediate, pressing human need of the crowd. There's an overflowing gift: six stone jars of wine when just one might have been enough. Those stone jars were huge – each holding 90 – 150 gallons – and they were filled to the brim. And from these big and special and filled to the brim jars came the best tasting wine served at the wedding. At the end of the celebration – not at the beginning.

I wonder if that isn't a sign for all of us too: the real human thirst, our deepest hungers, yearning, is for the life God offers us – the close, living relationship with the One who loves us. We are so spiritually hungry and thirsty that we fill our lives with “stuff” in a futile attempt to satisfy those needs. I often refer to that hunger and thirst as the hole in our souls. But stuff just doesn't work forever, does it. The abundance of stuff just doesn't compare with the overflowing abundance of grace that God freely offers us.

Timing and abundance – God breaks through in God's time and calls us to respond out of our abundance. We never know that God is all we need until God is all we have.

Last week we observed the week of prayer for Christian unity – a time set aside since 1908 by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of

Churches. The theme for this year: “You are witnesses of these things.” Incredible timing, isn’t it.

We have been witnesses of so many things this week, haven’t we. We have witnessed the effects of bitter cold and predictions of terrible storms – we were lucky here for sure. We have heard stunning words from the mouths of politicians, very rich politicians, who have talked about the pain families are experiencing is a small price to pay for the bigger picture – who don’t understand living paycheck to paycheck – who don’t understand how or why government employees have to go to food banks to feed their families – there are no words, are there. Sometimes our abundance gets in the way, doesn’t it. Our abundance can isolate us from the needs all around us.

But we’ve also witnessed miracles. Churches opening their doors to provide food and meals. People stepping up to donate gift cards, soup, volunteering to help in any way they can. A heightened awareness of the value of all people - and that made me think of the prayers for Christian unity week – we are all one in our efforts to help. And isn’t that what God wants from us. Isn’t that what Jesus still tries to teach us. We need a week of prayer for Christian unity. Every week of the year. And we need to respond with hope and compassion and let ourselves be transformed by the abundant Spirit, all in God’s time, not ours.

And, of course, this month we note the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I think of the move to make Martin Luther King’s birthday a day of service – I’ve seen articles that call us to make this not a day off but a day on. I’ve remembered the year when I was in Middlebury that I began a King Day tradition of taking a group of youth grocery shopping for the local food bank and then heading to the Soup Kitchen to help serve. And you are responding to this call too in many ways: we at the church have received emails and phone calls asking how can we help. All of us have something to offer in this massive effort, in the call to compassion and response Jesus models for us.

I’ve been thinking that the call to compassion Jesus shows us in our passage this morning also includes a call for justice. Surely Martin Luther King’s dream of a more just society, creation of the Beloved Community, embraces all people, even those who don’t get it, including the poorest of the poor in our country and around the world, including federal workers and those contracted to service those governmental agencies. The call for justice maybe means we have to educate those who don’t “get it.” Won’t be easy but maybe that’s our call. Some food for thought.

There is another person who has modeled for me the response to Jesus' call to compassion – responding quietly with great courage, regardless of the risk. Do you remember who Miep Gies was – she died a few years ago at the age of 100? Hopefully you remember her as the Miep in Anne Frank's diary – the gentile friend who helped hide the Frank family and 4 of their friends for more than two years in the small attic apartment in Amsterdam. She's the woman who brought groceries and supplies to keep all of them alive and who, along with her husband, lived every day in fear that the Nazis would discover what they were doing. I remembered when I met her some years ago in Connecticut at a gathering where she spoke on the anniversary of the publication of Anne Frank's diary – and I remembered the intensity of emotion I felt when the story I'd read suddenly had a face. When the horror of the holocaust had a face - in person, not just in the pictures we'd all seen. She was a remarkable woman and being in her presence was an honor that's hard to describe and I shall never forget it.

Connie Schultz is a columnist for the Plain Dealer in Cleveland and at the time of Miep's death wrote, "In 1997 I spent several days following Miep from venue to venue as she told Anne's story. At age 88 then, she resisted all efforts to depict her as a hero. To idealize her, she insisted, was to let off the hook those who fail to act in the face of injustice. I am not a hero, she said. I don't like being called a hero because no one should ever think you have to be special to help others. I am just a very common person. I could anticipate the sleepless nights and the remorse I would feel later in life if I did not assist those in trouble. Remorse is far worse than any death I could have faced."

The call to respond with compassion happens often quietly in ordinary places, like at a wedding feast so many years ago, like in an apartment in Amsterdam, like here at our church, in our ordinary daily lives as well –it's been a good week indeed – of hospitality, of sharing, of opening our hearts to our brothers and sisters in need right here. The needs of people, the need to create beloved community: those needs are always with us, aren't they.

It's so easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude – what do we do first. And sometimes the intensity of needs paralyzes us – but like Miep, we find ourselves pulled to assist. Like Martin Luther King, we find ourselves unable NOT to respond. And even though like Jesus, there are times when we think or say, what's it to me, we act anyway because Jesus tells us to, because Jesus modeled that for us.

I don't know where God will call me next, where God will call us as a church next. But I do know that we're to trust God's timing, to trust God

in all things, to ground ourselves in God, looking to Jesus as teacher, guide, and redeemer, and open our eyes, ears, hearts, and hands to pay attention to what God is saying to us, to what God is calling us to do.

What's first? We pray. We come into God's presence and open ourselves to God's will – we listen, we turn ourselves over to God and allow God to use us as God will. And God will use each of us. We are surrounded these days by evidence of that – in members of our congregation who have given their precious time and resources this week, in Martin Luther King, in Miep Gies.

First we pray. One of the most emotional moments came when I was talking with someone mourning the loss of someone dear in her family - her eyes filled with tears and she said, "You know, when you come right down to it, all we can do is pray – because that's the only thing that never lets us down – that's the only thing that's constant, that's sure." She was so right – because grounding ourselves in prayer will give us the strength to get through these and all the hard days to come. You never know that God is all you need until God is all you have.

How will the times we live in shape the ways we serve and witness? What hidden abundance hides among us, ready to be transformed like the water in those stone jars? What call has come, what need has arisen, what unforeseen opportunities lie ahead, that might lead to a rearrangement of your plans so that the reign of God might break in here and now? What surprises, what joy, like the surprise and the joy of the wine steward, might await you, us as church. Let's walk together and pray together and find out. Amen.