

“MESSIAH IN TRAINING”
Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11
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In 1954, Martin Luther King Jr began his first pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama. A year later, December 1, 1955, a seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested for sitting in the “Whites Only” section of a Montgomery bus. Even before Ms Parks’ courageous action, there had been talk in the African-American community of boycotting the segregated busses. But this one action, and Parks’ subsequent arrest, galvanized the community. On Monday, December 5th, the Montgomery bus boycott began. At a community meeting a few days later, thousands gathered to hear King address the situation. It was his first major public address, the first time he spoke not only to those in the local community, but to all who had access to the print media and television. “Love must be our regulating ideal,” Dr. King preached. “We must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries, ‘love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that spitefully use you. . .’ If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, ‘there lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’ This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.” And so began the career of one of the great civil rights leaders of all time. And so King went on, a voice for love over hate, unity over divisiveness, justice gained by the dignity of non-violent protest.

Beginnings are important. At those points when we start a new phase of our lives, we make important decisions about who we will be and how we will function; and more often than not, those decisions set the structure of our becoming. They did for Dr. King. They did as well for Jesus. This morning’s gospel lesson is about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as told by the gospel writer John.

Each of the gospels begins Jesus’ ministry differently, a reflection of what each writer found most important about Jesus. With John it is the wedding in Cana, a story found only in John’s gospel. I’ve never thought of John as having a particularly well developed sense of humor, but as we look at this story, I think we have to stop for a moment at the conversation between Jesus and his mother. There they are at this wedding. Obviously it’s pretty far into the evening because the wine is almost gone. You can imagine Jesus and his mother standing along a wall, and she elbows him in the ribs to tell him the wine is running out. He looks back at her annoyed. “How is that my business?” She gives him the “mother look.” He insists, “My time is not yet come.” Again the look, followed by her telling the servants to do whatever he tells them. It’s just funny, and very like John, who for all the elegance and high structure of his writing, also gives us some of the most intimate vignettes of the gospels. This story presents Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry as hesitant, uncertain. Was he unsure of his power or had he not yet decided how he was going to go about his ministry? We don’t know what made him hesitate. But we do know that as the story plays out, we see elements that will be consistent throughout Jesus’ ministry, elements that tell us who Jesus is to John.

The first thing we see is that this initial miracle is one purely of opportunity. Running out of wine at a

wedding may be embarrassing, causing loss of face for the host, but it is not a tragedy. In a hierarchy of social and human ills to address, it would be at the bottom of most lists. Jesus turned water into wine because he was there, because he cared for these people, and because he could. And so he continued. I think it's vitally important for us to see that Jesus was not a messiah with a structured game plan. When he taught, he taught whoever would listen. When he healed, he did not set up a clinic, do triage so that his gifts were used to help the very sickest or those most deserving. He healed whomever he met who needed healing. When he fed the 5000, it was not to create a big splash, but because that's how many people there were and they were hungry. This Jesus, this messiah, is not going to be a Jesus just for the righteous, or just for the poor, or for those who fall within certain parameters of need, but he is one for all comers. Jesus is not a structured social service agency; there are no distinctions made in his ministry between levels of goodness or levels of need. He was there for any he encountered and any who sought him out.

And this is important for us to hear. I think that often we in the church are distressed and unsure because we can't address well all the needs that exist around us, and that makes us so discouraged that we wonder if our small efforts matter. Jesus would say they do. Jesus models seizing the opportunities that are ours, that come to us one way or another, and then doing what we can in that moment. For example, there's a huge homeless problem in this country right now. It's overwhelming, and beyond our scope to fix by ourselves. From one angle, to start a cold weather shelter for men in Corvallis that serves at most thirty people seems a drop in the bucket in addressing this problem, almost insignificant. But Jesus would disagree. He would say that the persistence and hard work of those who made this shelter happen does matter. Some who previously did not, now have a place to sleep that is warm and dry. Lives have been touched. Presence has been met with presence, and for Jesus that meeting, presence to presence, for whomever we encounter, whatever they need, is what is most centrally important. That's how he began, and how he went on.

There's a second important beginning in this miracle story. The gospel writer makes sure we know that there are six large jars in the room of this wedding feast, each holding twenty to thirty gallons of liquid. So we are being told that Jesus did not just turn a little water into wine at the end of the party; he turned between 120 and 180 gallons of water into wine. Think about that. It's a huge amount, over the top. And we are supposed to notice that. It's like the loaves and fishes story later in John's gospel when all are fed, and baskets and baskets of bread and fish were left over. Jesus is about there always being enough for all. There is nothing about Jesus that has to do with scarcity. He is about demonstrating God's abundance: abundant love, abundant power, abundant grace, abundant life. For all who desire it. All. I think it is all too easy for us who would follow Jesus to hold to an ethic of scarcity. That ethic can take many forms. For example: Salvation is only important if some people have it and some don't. God can only love us and bless our relationships if they look like this. I don't really deserve God's love and attention because there are those out there who need it more. It's important to acquire and gather up all we can for ourselves because there's not enough out there and you'd better grab all you can get. Are any of these sentiments familiar to you? They are rife in the larger culture, and too often in the culture of the church also. Familiar they may be, but they are not the gospel. From the story of the manna in the desert for the Israelites to the wine at a wedding in Cana, if we would know God, if we would follow Christ, then we must dare to open our hands and our hearts and accept, live from the abundance God

gives. What do we really need? What truly fills us up? Why do we draw lines that close others out? Why do we draw lines that close us out? To follow Jesus is to trust the God who gives and gives, whose resources are endless, and whose gifts are always extravagant in their goodness.

So this is John's Jesus, the one who takes whatever opportunity comes his way to touch lives and preach the gospel, the one who models God's extravagant abundance and love. For you. For me. For all. No exceptions. This Jesus blesses equally family weddings and bus boycotts, consents to be present at homeless shelters, at demonstrations for justice, and in the quiet moments of the human heart. This Jesus will touch all who come to him, no matter who they are, no matter where they've been, no matter what they need. That's how he started, and 2,000 years later, that's still how he goes on. Thanks be to God. Amen.