

Using Our Gifts
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
January 17, 2016

To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:7)

I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!

Did I surprise you? Were you caught off-guard? Did you get a brief emotional tingle? There is something about weddings that appeals to our most gentle, nurturing, loving selves. Most of us harbor idealized feelings about the institution in spite of statistics that indicate in our present time fewer than half survive "till death do us part". These romanticized notions remain glowingly burnished despite our own contradictory, often painful experiences. It would seem there is something primal about the "institution" that facts and experience cannot negate.

Full disclosure: we may be reflecting more on this topic in the months to come since my older daughter Jacqui got engaged last month. He is a Captain in the Army expecting new orders in June and she won't finish her Masters until July so no details for a while!

At a recent interfaith gathering I was reminded that for our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers marriage is one of the seven sacraments. Perhaps the wedding at Cana recorded only by John is used to support that tradition. Surely there is reference to the creation story in the second chapter of Genesis when the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." And God made woman to be a partner and Scripture tells us "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."

Regrettably, those verses have been "understood" incorrectly to rationalize a relationship that is not a partnership but rather one of the male dominance. Indeed the entire topic of marriage has become the

source of great controversy not only in the church but broadly in today's culture. But that is not this morning's message. This morning we want to reflect on the mystery of relationships, the presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ's ministry of grace that does not weaken over time but continues to strengthen and improve. Our reading from Isaiah uses marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. In the letter to the Ephesians the author quotes those verses from Torah concluding: "this is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (5:32)". But note this; the great mystery of Christ and church is steadfast – not like marriages made here on earth. As members of the church we become part of the

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body of Christ; one flesh. And in Paul's letter to the Corinthians he tells them each "is given the *manifestation* of the Spirit for the common good;" (v. 12:7); we become one with the Holy Spirit who gives us our unique gifts. In our oneness with the Holy Spirit, as part of the body of Christ we are called to use those gifts to build God's kingdom here on earth. Come to think of it, that's not a bad Trinitarian summary of Christianity!

Our gospel reading from John this morning describes the first of Jesus's miracles or as John prefers to call them, signs. It is very early in his ministry; indeed he says to his mother sounding inexplicably sharp, "my time is not yet come." As miracles go, it seems to be a bit on the superficial side. Weddings are important and being a good

host is certainly a point of pride especially for these life marking celebrations. I don't know, maybe it's the hair shirt in me but running out of wine seems less vital than restoring sight, casting out demons, or bringing a daughter or best friend back to life. Without examining the science of what may or may not have occurred at Cana let's reflect on the more symbolic or metaphorical implications, or as Walter Brueggeman calls it, the poetry of this memorable story and how it connects to the gifts given to us through the Spirit. Part of the enduring brilliance of Scripture is to engage culture whatever the era. Do you remember Herod's Song from Jesus Christ Superstar of some 40 years ago?

So you are the Christ You're the great Jesus Christ, Prove to me that you're divine Change my water into wine That's all you need do Then I'll know it's all true, C'mon King of the Jews! Exhibit A that Cana is firmly embedded in pop culture! And that really isn't a bad thing!

John tells us the wedding was on the third day which seems to mean from when Jesus selected his disciples. In some ways it seems a curious way to start his record of Jesus' ministry. And we wonder why Mary his mother is also there. Commentators suggest that she might have been a friend of the family giving the wedding. Since these affairs lasted days, perhaps Jesus and his party were walking through town and Mary asked that they be invited on short notice. After all, Cana was just three or four miles or a morning's walk from Nazareth (see Exeg. on 1:43-51). Perhaps Jesus and his retinue were the cause of the miscalculation. No doubt Mary noticed the whispering and growing embarrassment and understood at once that something was worrying the hosts. If Jesus was indirectly the reason for running out of food and wine causing the host to be shamed, perhaps she thought, Jesus can help make it right.

And boy did he! If my math is right, converting those six stone water jars produced about 400

bottles of wine or more than 30 cases. That's some party! As Jill Duffield from Presbyterian Outlook put it: "That abundant, to the brim, gallon upon gallon, really wonderful wine is indicative of God's essential nature. More wine than could ever be consumed points to the gifts of grace come to us through Jesus Christ. Wine brings to consciousness the sacrament of communion, the blood of Christ, forgiveness, salvation. Water makes us think baptism and Holy Spirit. This is a story of the presence of God in our midst, the present and coming reign of God - yes, the expansion of the Kingdom and happiness is of far less value than the gift of God's very self. The mystery of love is not only between a man and woman but between God and humanity.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul describes the potential power of a congregation; that the variety of gifts you and I have been individually blessed to receive can be combined into a unique wisdom that nearly always rises above the wisdom of any single individual. Although history has noted, especially in the sciences, individuals whose insight has resulted in incredible breakthroughs; think Newton or Einstein. But historically, especially for the larger issues confronting a community or society at large, the wisdom of the whole most often exceeds that of any individual or dare I say political party. So it might seem an odd theme to develop in this election year when populism is being stirred in some rather disturbing ways. But if we believe in the collective wisdom of God's gracious gifts, it does offer hope in the longer term.

The Interpreter's Bible has a powerful description of a multi-dimensional understanding of the miracles in Scripture. In describing the writings of J.A. Hadfield they assert "That the five thousand had a meal he had no doubt; but to him this is an illustration of the more glorious fact that Christ can feed the hungry souls of needy men. He was entirely sure that Lazarus rose up out of the grave. But the miracle of miracles was not even that, but that the voice of power can reach to those long dead in trespasses and sin, and startle them into newness of spiritual life and being." These

incidents are, so to speak, the pictures John inserts into his book to make the gospel visible; so that at a glance we can take in what would have needed pages to describe.

This weekend we remember the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose 87th birthday would have been this last Friday. King was a Baptist minister, founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal, the Presidential Medal of Honor, and the Nobel Prize for peace. Dr. King was one of the great orators of the 20th century who's I Have a Dream speech may be the most widely known speech of our present time. And while there were hundreds who worked tirelessly to undo decades of racial injustice, King was the dominant and galvanizing force. In fact there were two young men from Pelham who were murdered by the KKK in Philadelphia, Mississippi trying to register voters. As history would have it, they grew up on Harmon Avenue, renamed Schwerner Way, the street where Greta Facey lives.

It was Rev. King who prevailed within the movement to use nonviolent tactics to address the shocking discrimination that still prevailed one hundred years after the adoption of the 14th amendment. That amendment guaranteed the full rights of citizenship to all persons born in the United States. Dr. King modeled his tactics based on his understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ. He understood that he was part of the body of Christ. God blessed Martin Luther King, Jr. with a variety of gifts which he used most fully to bring seismic change where it was desperately needed. It is regrettable that nearly 50 years after King's assassination at age 39 that our nation and the world is slipping backwards. Racial injustice has re-emerged as one of the most intractable problems in our nation's history. It is of course fitting to remember King's vital work to reclaim the elemental tenets of human decency. But if that is all we do, we will be guilty of a sin of omission.

I indulged in the Pastoral Sabbath at Holmes Presbyterian Camp this week and a pastor friend

who was also there posted a short video from the Guardian newspaper of London. The narrator asked the question: Are you anti- or non-racist? The much abbreviated message is You are a non-racist if you say I am not, I don't, I won't, I've never, I can't. But what you end up with is an entire moral stance, an entire code for living your life and dealing with all the injustice of the world by not doing a damn thing. That's the great thing about non- you can put it off by simply rolling over in your bed and going to sleep. The narrator goes on to ask what if you replaced the C in racist with a P? The word becomes rapist. What would you be then? An anti or a non -rapist? It's a powerful video, one that calls us to do more than simply be indignant about the injustices we see and hear in the media. It calls us to use as fully as we are able the gifts we have received through the Holy Spirit. It calls us to trust the generosity of Jesus that we will be changed and that the best is yet to come. Focus on your particular gift and act – whether it is through financial support, signing petitions, writing letters, manning voting stations or speaking to friends about your deeply held views. We can also feed the hungry, comfort the bereaved, and give direction to those in transition. In this life we all have or will need a helping hand and our Creator is depending on us to deliver what is needed through the gifts given us.

We may not have the courage and oratory skills of Martin Luther King, Jr. but we must recognize the gifts we have been given and use them as fully as we are able. We have been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. We have been cleansed in the waters of baptism, forgiven in the blood of the Cross and become the bride of our Creator that as disciples of the Lord we may build God's Kingdom; know God's presence; and embrace God's peace.

Amen