

At the First Sign

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 17, 2016.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12:7

Weddings in ancient Palestine involved the whole community. The people in the village of Cana in Galilee worked together to prepare for a wedding of one of their own. The bride's parents did their best to make it a happy occasion for their daughter on her special day. It was the custom to invite everyone in the village and the festivities went on for several days before the bride and her bridegroom could embark on their new life together.

Among the guests who arrive from Nazareth are Mary and her son Jesus. When the marriage rites are completed, the guests gather for the wedding feast. Everyone is enjoying the feast when the hosts are embarrassed to find that they have run out of wine. Mary confidently assures everyone that her son would solve the situation. To which he responds, "Oh, Mother! What does this have to do with me?" Now if your mother ever volunteered you to help as my mother often did, you know the feeling! I can hear her now, "Robert will do that for you, won't you, Robert?" I had no choice! Mary tells the servants to follow her son's instructions. He orders the servants to fill water into six earthen water pots that hold twenty gallons each. Upon tasting it, they are found to contain wine. The party is saved and the hosts are greatly relieved.

Word soon got out about the wedding guest who saved the day. Who was this man who did such an extraordinary thing? People continue to ask, "How did he do that?" A miracle by nature defies scientific explanation. What cannot be explained remains a mystery. If it can be explained, it ceases to be a miracle or a mystery. The significance of this event is how the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist are spiritually transformed into the real presence of Christ.

If you have ever had something fortunate happen to you that you can't explain, it is a gift from the spirit of God. Saint Paul describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gift of knowledge enables us to discern the factors in a given situation. The gift of faith enables us to have confidence in the possibility of a vision. The gift of healing gives health and wholeness to those who are ill in mind, body or spirit. The gift of prophecy is given to those who see what is wrong and know what it takes to make it right. The gift of discernment is given to those who help us change the way we think and act.

Martin Luther King Jr., whom we remember this weekend, was a man with many spiritual gifts. He led us out of the wilderness of racial prejudice to an awareness of the need to assure the basic rights of all people. In the tradition of the ancient prophets, challenged our assumptions and changed the way we thought and lived.

Just as the water was transformed into wine, Dr. King transformed our attitude with regard race. In our diversity, we all have common traits and concerns as members of the human race. The reluctant but gifted Dr. King was called to lead the movement for racial and social justice by challenging our old assumptions and changing the status quo. He led us out of the wilderness of prejudice to the promised land of equal opportunity. He had a dream that someday people would be judged, "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

The symbolic beginning civil rights movement began in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Birmingham, Alabama. She set the tone of the movement that would catapult Dr. King into national leadership to confront racism by non-violent resistance. He inspired all of us, both black and white, to work together to fight prejudice and promote justice.

When Dr. King responded to the call to take leadership for racial and economic justice, he received death threats, his home was dynamited and he was stabbed. He was arrested jailed numerous times. His dream was that some day all people, black and white, would be free at last. Until that time, none of us would be free.

How well I remember that night in April 1968 when Dr. King was killed. The sky in the nation's capital was aglow with flames as the rioting and burning took place there and in other cities across the nation. We loaded up our cars with basic necessities for the people who lived in burned out neighborhoods and took them into a neighborhood where stores had been besieged, looted and burned. It was an intense time. The issues were clear and we knew what to do.

My own personal transformation came earlier in my college days in the south with segregated lunch counters and businesses with signs that read, "white patrons only." I had to examine some of my own assumptions and learned that we all have to be honest with ourselves about our own prejudice. Racism and prejudice are very human traits and are not exclusive to white people, but the responsibility for eliminating racism is largely on those who have the power to make the changes.

Since the early days of the civil rights movement, many battles have been fought and won, but the war is not over. Institutional racism, no matter how subtle, is still very real. The survival of the human race depends upon all of us working together to eradicate prejudice.

Laws regarding civil rights uphold equal opportunity and economic justice for everyone. What was thought to be an advance in racial justice in the election of our first African American President has instead resulted in an increase of a racist and reactionary attitudes. As the water was transformed into wine at the wedding in Cana, so we need to fulfill Dr. King's dream by eradicating racism and transforming us into a more tolerant and just society.

Recently, the leaders of the Anglican Communion suspended the American Episcopal Church for three years from official involvement because of our inclusion of LGBT people and marriage equality. Essentially, we have been made second-class Anglicans for accepting LGBT people as first class Christians. We are being punished for refusing to sacrifice our integrity for the sake of unity. As Dr. King observed, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

It may take a miracle for Christians to cease excluding people because of their sexual orientation and for the right for all to marry the one they love. I believe that miracles can and do happen! In the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, "miracles happen when we start by doing what is necessary, then by doing what is possible, and suddenly we are doing what was thought impossible."