

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 14, 2007

*Reflection from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon
"The Drum Major Instinct," delivered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta,
Georgia on February 4, 1968.*

"And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important — wonderful. If you want to be recognized — wonderful. If you want to be great — wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.

"And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."



Readings: Psalm 36: 5 - 10

The Gospel According to John 2: 1-11

Hymns: #429 *Lord, You Give the Great Commission*
#298 *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*
#445 *Great Day!*

(Draft)

When it's not your time...

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I have come to believe that Jesus grew into his ministry. You may remember a sermon a while back about Jesus and the Syro-Phoenecian woman. She's the one that asks Jesus for some help for her sick daughter. Jesus, who had yet to expand his ministry beyond the Jews, at first refuses to help.

Remember the passage? It starts with Matthew 15:21:

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

A hard text, unless one thinks of this woman and another of the very important women in Jesus' life who set him straight, or as my friend Susan DeGeorge says, "Called him out!" Out to his growing ministry. This Syro-Phoenecian woman somehow stopped Jesus in his Palestinian tracks and opened him up to the idea that he was sent to more than the Jews.

It is no coincidence, I think, that one of the very next stories is about how Jesus takes compassion on the assembled masses (of all different backgrounds) and refuses to let them leave their time with him until they are fed.

Jesus feed them all –spiritually and physically. The ancient Jewish sayings make little difference between the two – to be fed is to be fed.

And, this morning, we are in Cana again with Jesus and Mary and friends have at a certain wedding. When the servants report that the wine has dried up, Mary tells Jesus about it. In his response, we have one of those Jesus replies that makes us cringe a bit, sort of like "throw it to the dogs," he says: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

(Much is made commentary).

There is a lot made of the possible translations of the words we read. Biblical scholars suggest that the proper translation of the Koiné Greek is "What has that to do with you and me?"

Written by John, this miracle appears only in his gospel -- written somewhere around 125 CE. It is not reported in Mark, Matthew, or Luke.

Nor does John mention Mary by name. John's focus is Jesus. For John – this is about Jesus. Still, whatever the relevant facts may be, John has a purpose in telling the story of this miracle, and it is to establish the beginning of Jesus' ministry and his cosmological relationship to God. It is what we refer to as the

high Christology of John – extending Jesus beyond time and space as one with the God and Spirit that existed long before any of this was known. (John 1: 1-5)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Still, why the sharpness in Jesus' reply to his mother and the eventual acquiescence? John must have had a reason – or maybe it is just the way the story had been told and John reported it as he received it. The secondary nature of the woman (to John at least) was unimportant. It was the miracle that was paramount, the Christ, and even a Christ who is not beholding – to any earthly individual. I don't know for sure... but it does make you think about John's outlook.

Either way, Jesus eventually listens to Mary. Something she says touches him in a way that reverses his position. "It's not my time...." Whether through guilt or inspiration changes to, "OK, mom, ok. I'm sorry. Sure, I'll take care of it."

Or maybe, as with the earlier example of the Syro-Phoneacian woman, this was an example about Jesus discovering his ministry through others – this time his mother. Maybe he walks away at first, a little caught up with himself and his plans, but the Spirit won't let go – he feels it's pull – and Jesus lets go of his timing and says a quiet prayer, something like: "OK, Abba – let your will be done," and in a very public way begins to be who he was sent here to be.

Now, I really don't know whether the water turns to wine. I am not sure if the story happens as reported. I tend to think with God anything is possible, and if God wanted Jesus to perform this miracle – it certainly happened.

So the miracle part is not as important to me as the miracles I have seen in my life that are their own evidence of the nature and existence of God for me. So when I read this, I try to understand it from a study of the times and the text, but also about how the message, the Good News unfolds in the now, which is really all we ever have. That's why I think the message moves forward, not as a fossil, but as a living message in a living document that reads us as much as we read it!

And this morning's message is once again about servanthood – and how we (and even Jesus) has to learn how to be servants – and then pass it on, teaching others.

I believe that we all have somewhere, at some time, maybe some of us are there right now – been in a situation where we just knew it was time. We knew that it was time to decide. Maybe the decision we were about to make was going to be

life changing, or relationship changing, or a sacrifice of time and energy -- maybe it had on the other side of it no assurance or promise – we just knew it was time – and then the choice: were we going ahead – or wait ---- for a better time.

I remember the time I was interviewed by one of the students for the school newspaper at the high school. In the middle of the interview she said, “Now, Mr. Bagnuolo, would you care to comment about your statement in the Journal News last October (several months earlier) that you were an openly gay elder in the Presbyterian Church.” I almost choked. I started to fidget a bit and said that I really wasn’t ashamed of whom I was, but that coming out in the high school in this public of a way might affect my teaching, relationships with students and adults... what has this to do with me??? It’s not my time... and then I hear the voice: “Either you are full of it or you’re not.” And I said, “Yes...”

It was life changing, and I had no idea just how much so. I had no idea how in my own life that began my ministry – my being – in a very public way and all the challenges and gifts that followed. I have to tell you the truth, I have come to look for those moments, find them as part of the “life” of life, so to speak – as sometimes risk-filled and unsettling as they may seem to be.

You know, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to think that Jesus felt a little uneasy and uncertain about the outcome of things in his life from time to time, too. I’m not comparing myself to Jesus in any way – except how we all might – as humans. For he certainly was human, as are we. And we know he relied on what he heard inside of himself, just as we often do and have in our own lives...and if we make a mistake, well, we’ll survive. Sometimes our choices produce sweet or vintage wine and sometimes sour grapes. Regardless, it’s wine one way or the other. It listening and acting that counts.

It is good to think of all of this in terms of ourselves, but informative to reflect on others who have done the same, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How many times, I wonder, did he hold his breath as he took a step forward, challenged by those he felt called to serve – threatened by those who promised to stop him. And, toward the end of his career, when he felt compelled to speak out against the Vietnam War, to the great consternation of many, he simply did what he felt called to do.

There are his words that set him apart from many in his constituency:

“And not only does this thing [the “Drum Major Instinct” – the drive to be first] go into the racial struggle, it goes into the struggle between nations. And I would submit to you this morning that what is wrong in the world today is that the nations of the world are engaged in a bitter, colossal contest for supremacy. And if something doesn’t happen to stop this trend,

I'm sorely afraid that we won't be here to talk about Jesus Christ and about God and about brotherhood too many more years.

"If somebody doesn't bring an end to this suicidal thrust that we see in the world today, none of us are going to be around, because somebody's going to make the mistake through our senseless blunderings of dropping a nuclear bomb somewhere. And then another one is going to drop. And don't let anybody fool you, this can happen within a matter of seconds. They have twenty-megaton bombs in Russia right now that can destroy a city as big as New York in three seconds, with everybody wiped away, and every building. And we can do the same thing to Russia and China.

But this is why we are drifting. And we are drifting there because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. "I must be first." "I must be supreme." "Our nation must rule the world." And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I'm going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken. "

Dr. King called out to speak. Jesus called out to ministry. We, all, called out to serve by the commitment we have made to seek to grow in faith and serve others here and out there from this place. That commitment is a dynamic one that demands we respond and react to the voice we hear inside and that of others calling out for help.

It is a voice that calls us all forward into uncertain waters – or wines, perhaps. And ultimately, it is not the outcome that matters but the willingness to respond as one, sometimes – but more often in community – like this one here.

And, sometimes, perhaps, it is as seminary professor Alan Roxburgh summarizes, "God has always found in what appears to be the most godforsaken of places and the most inauspicious of locations, people, and situations. God seems to be present where there is little or no expectation." No one, no place, no matter how unlikely they may seem – is immune from being used by God.

And, there is no wait for tomorrow in the realm of the spirit. It is rather a conversation that is sometimes quiet and other times filled with marching bands and symphonies. It requires only the commitment to and greatness of servanthood, drum majors aside.

Listen, my sisters and brothers, listen to how God speaks to you in your lives. However you know God, pay attention to those quiet little nudges as much as the loud and clear clarion calls... and then reveal yourself and your thoughts to others whom you trust... and decide and act.

If we do that, I think, we won't be so worried about "When it's not our time..."
We'll just know what it is we are to do...and be in the place and community to do
it. In this post-modern world – it is, I think, as St. Teresa of Avila says:

“Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet, on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
Compassion on this world
Yours are the feet
With which He walks to do good.
Yours are the hands
With which He blesses all the world
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet.
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes, through which He Looks
compassion on the world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”
-St. Teresa of Avila

Amen.

Thanks to the Rev, Susan DeGeorge for the Allan Roxburgh and St. Teresa of
Avila quotes.