

The Vessels Are Full

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John 2:1-11

January 20, 2013

Thank you for the privilege of bringing the message this evening. I'm always honored to stand before you and share my thoughts.

So, here we are on the eve of the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, and I have felt for a while now that the best way to honor Dr. King's life and ministry is to begin with a personal inventory of where you are on the subject of race and racism. So, if you don't mind, my plan is to take my own inventory on the subject—in front of all of you.

Our lectionary passage tonight is about the first of Jesus' miracles, which was performed at the wedding at Cana—a story which, of course, makes one immediately think of racism and Dr. King's legacy.

As often happens when I have the opportunity to dig into a scripture, I found things that surprised me. What you usually hear about this passage is that turning the water at the wedding feast into wine is the first miracle Jesus ever performed, thereby proving to his disciples Jesus' divine nature and his status as the Son of God.

What is interesting about the context of this event is that weddings during Jesus' lifetime were not at all like what we enjoy today around marriage ceremonies. A wedding could be a week-long event that involved the homes and families of both the bride and groom.

A contract was involved, and the hospitality extended to the guests was a very serious and important piece of the ritual. To run out of wine, as did happen, could potentially bring great shame, embarrassment, and breaking of the wedding contract to the family involved. Also, some commentators believe that Mary may have been one of the organizers of the wedding—hence her concern and insistence that Jesus fix this grievous problem.

A few months ago, one of my former students, Kaleb, called and asked if I would pick him up from soccer practice and take him home. I've known Kaleb since he was a seventh-grade middle schooler. He is now 17 and in his junior year at SILSA [School of Inquiry and Life Sciences at Asheville]. So I picked him up from practice, and he immediately began to practice one of the things he's most skilled at—begging for food.

He convinced me to stop at a convenience store. As we approached the counter, I noticed the employee behind the counter seemed less than friendly. After a few moments of complete unfriendliness, he informed us that he was refusing to serve us until Kaleb took the hoodie he was wearing off his head, explaining that he had been robbed many times by people wearing hoodies. Kaleb removed his hoodie and we made our purchase and left, feeling disrespected and angry and slightly humiliated.

Jesus gave in to Mary's request and provided wine for the wedding feast—not just any wine, but wine that was of the best quality. When he was reluctant to do so, when he explained that the time for the start of his ministry on earth had not yet come, when he had just come from his desert experience where he refused to perform miracles at the urging of Satan—he acquiesced and performed a miracle—his first—turning water into wine.

On the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, 17-year old African American teenager Trayvon Martin was murdered. Unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin was murdered,

allegedly by a man who reportedly felt Trayvon looked suspicious—dangerous. It has been widely reported that Trayvon, at the time of his death, was wearing a hoodie.

Not only did Jesus provide wine that was of the highest quality for the feast, he provided a *lot* of it. Servants were told to fill six stone vessels, each of which held between twenty and thirty gallons of water—usually reserved for use in purification rituals.

Christians for a United Community, the organization for which I work part-time as director, is currently considering entering into partnership with the Randolph School in the Montford section of Asheville. Christians for a United Community has as its mission addressing racism and disparities caused by racism.

Randolph School, a satellite campus of Asheville Middle and High Schools, is for students who, for whatever reason, are unable to continue their education on those two main campuses. Some students end up at Randolph because of suspension or expulsion from other schools; some self-select the Randolph School. The student population of Randolph School is 98 percent African American; and the percentage of those students living in poverty is the same figure: 98 percent.

Many of you will remember that last year Marc Mullinax and I did a joint sermon around racism and privilege that we presented here at the Circle and repeated in several churches in the area. In our sermon, Marc would talk about the privileges afforded him as a white person in our society, and I would talk about the kinds of internalized racism that led me down the road of low self-esteem. After doing our “road show” several times, mostly for rooms full of white people, I told Marc that I was retiring from that particular sermon—that I could no longer stand in front of white congregations, bare my soul, and talk about the ways I felt inadequate. I literally did not have the inner strength to do it anymore.

So here you have it—a snapshot of where I’ve been over the last few months. All of the incidents I have just spoken of—and so much more—have driven me to a place of darkness, anger, and hopelessness.

Following the Trayvon Martin shooting, I was so filled with despair, so filled with anger—I was so close to hating George Zimmerman that I scared myself. Every time I saw that picture of Trayvon’s face that was all over the media, I saw the face of every 17-year-old boy I know and love. I’ve come to understand that my anger at George Zimmerman was fueled by fear—fear for each young person out there with dark skin and a hoodie who may end up in the sights of the next George Zimmerman.

From the most blatant expressions of racism to the micro-aggressions I face every day as an African American man—all of it has seeped into me and changed me in a way that is unhealthy for me, and hypocritical for a man who professes to work to unite the community. So, here I stand on the eve of Dr. King’s holiday and the second inauguration of our first African American president—empty, bereft, and largely unable honestly to utter even the simplest of clichés that show up this time of year: “Keep the dream alive,” “Remember Dr. King’s legacy,” etc. And, very importantly, I have been in serious denial about my mental state—running from my own anger and sadness.

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I have no doubt that many of you have felt the same kind of hopelessness and despair. I believe that we as a society, and particularly those of us who claim to follow Jesus, cannot in any good conscience close our eyes and turn our backs on the existence and destructive power of racism. Neither can we allow the darkness of this disease to distort who we are and lead us down the road to apathy and destructive, dangerous behavior.

I believe there are several truths out there for us—for me—as we—as I—seek to survive in a racist society: The truth is that I believe in a God who created this universe and sent His Son to die for me—a God who loves me and wants what’s best for me. Those full vessels at that wedding in Cana are such an example of God’s love—God’s concern for every part of our lives. That Jesus would make his first miracle about guests at a wedding feast tells me that God cares for every part of me—from the trivial to the earth-shattering—and is willing to stand with me and protect me and fill a water jar for me.

The truth is that I am called by my God to stand against injustice—whatever it looks like. And God would not call me to work that He would not sustain me through. “Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world.”

The truth is that there is hope all around me. There is hope in the second inauguration of our first African American president. There is hope in the face of every young person I know that they will work to make this world a better place. There is hope in coalitions like Christians for a United Community and the Center for Diversity Education. And there is hope in the face of each person who shows up for the prayer breakfasts and the peace marches. There is hope all around me—all around us. But we must—we *must*—look racism in the eye, admit our pain and sadness and grief, and then take action.

I am a child of God—the same God who created the universe and filled those water jars at the wedding at Cana. And just like Jesus cared about his mother and all those wedding guests, he cares for me in my season of pain

You know, we may live in a society wounded by racism, but the water jars are full. We live in a world where African American young men are in prison in larger numbers than they are in college, but those water jars are still full. We live in a world where a disproportionate number of people of color are sitting on death row, but those water jars are full. We live in a society where Black folks are getting sick and dying from diseases in greater numbers than our white counterparts, but those water jars are still full. And the reality of those full water jars points to the reality of our faith: that the forces of darkness, injustice, disparity, and unfairness will not—cannot—win.

It has been reported that one of Dr. King’s favorite hymns was “Precious Lord.” The words of that hymn are both fitting and soothing for our continued journey:

*Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand;
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn...
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on, to the light,
Take my hand, precious Lord,
And lead me home.*

Amen.