

*The Second Sunday after the Epiphany*  
*Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

*Water into Wine*  
*by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

Reading John is always a bit like dropping a coin down a well and waiting for it to land. Things are always deeper than they seem in John, more full of meaning, and layer upon layer of profound theological insight and a careful investigation of words must be gotten through before we hit bottom. . .if we ever hit bottom. . .if we ever hear that coin finally break the surface of the water. And that we may not is only John's invitation to us into that awesome mystery that we call God.

Today's gospel reading is famous for many reasons: it is the first miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John; it is the first public event he attends following his baptism and the gathering of his first disciples; it is the first appearance of his mother in this gospel. And it often is read and understood as a holding up of the virtues of marriage by Christ.

That is a curious part of our tradition as Christians, actually, since the bride and groom remain unnamed and, in fact, barely enter the story. Instead the focus begins with a curious exchange between Jesus and his mother – sort of a picture postcard of first-century Mediterranean family dynamics leaving us to wonder what kind of relationship John is trying to paint here. Is Jesus finally exercising his authority as a grown adult? Or is he revealing his mother's faith? What sort of tone of voice does Mary really use when she says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you"? We might hear there a mother throwing up her hands in exasperation after hearing such harsh words from her first-born. Or a woman of profound faith and pride in her offspring placing hope in what he is about to do.

And then a peculiar exchange occurs as Jesus asks water be brought, and it changes into wine. It might sound at first to be some kind of fancy Messianic parlor trick. Maybe even a bit self-aggrandizing. But, this is John's Gospel. Nothing is as it seems.

I have to chuckle a bit at the chief steward. Of all the people in this story, he is the least aware of what is going on. Sort of like a parish priest. We are often, sometimes sadly. . .the last to know what's going on. Perhaps we deserve no better. The chief steward can only remark to the bridegroom that social protocol has been broken, but in a wonderful way. . . the best wine is served last. . . the standard order of things is turned on its head. . . We never hear the reaction of the bridegroom, although it seems Jesus' actions have saved his honor. In his culture, the wine running out early would have been an almost unrecoverable disaster.

So it is the disciples who see that in this sign, a remarkable opening is made for the coming of the Reign of God, an opening for a new reality has begun to appear in a most unexpected place and way, and their affection for Jesus grows.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. pp. 66-69

While sitting in a jail in Birmingham 44 years ago this spring, Martin Luther King, Jr. composed a letter<sup>2</sup> that has become among the most legendary documents of the Civil Rights Movement. It was not written to a President, a Congressman, a Senator, or a state Governor. Nor was it penned to a mayor or a local official who had sway over police and policies in the deep South where Jim Crow and segregation were still alive and well.

It was addressed by Martin as a member of the clergy. . .to members of the clergy: namely eight, white Alabama clergymen, a number of whom were bishops, including one who was Bishop Coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. One of ours, you might say.

They were upset by Martin's leadership of civil disobedience, and his messing about with the order of things. . .especially, it seems, in a place that he didn't call home. The way to settle the issue of civil rights for African-Americans, they argued, was through the courts and negotiation – through timely, ordered, process.

In other words, the African-American community needed to just wait a little bit longer for the slow wheels of bureaucratic process to work it out. Funny thing is, they'd been waiting for 340 years, as Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote to them.

Sometimes the people in charge just don't get it. Changing water into wine, performing miracles that open eyes and liberate people is a vocation not just reserved for Jesus Christ, but given to the entire Christian Church. And it's a messy business. It doesn't follow the cut-and-dried rules or timely processes or the expected channels of jurisprudence and legislative debate. It involves, rather, bold action that will empower those who are least empowered, and strikes at the heart of old evils with a powerful and life-changing love for those who have been most oppressed.

This is what Martin Luther King, Jr., saw from a prison cell that those sitting in their comfortable offices could not. A man who helped lead a people out of despair and centuries of indignity. . .A person who, even in the face of death threats, stood up to the powers and principalities of systemic violence and racism. . .this man whom we now can see, with the benefit of hindsight, was upholding not only sound American ideals, but deeply rooted Christian principles. . .and this is why we remember him this weekend.

Martin was in the business of changing water into wine: bringing about an impossible transformation to help those whose dignity was threatened, following closely in the footsteps of Christ. And so we should follow.

We live in a world still very much torn by strife, violence, and oppression. We are marked, many of us, by privilege that was not of our own making. But we carry it nonetheless and have responsibility for how we live into it or choose not to. . .how we reach out to those in need with tender hearts and be ourselves transformed. . . or too often take the easier road of self-protection, benefiting directly or indirectly from the structures that continue to weigh down the least among us – this matters deeply to the heart of God and demands much of us.

Martin Luther King put it this way in his letter:

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

*I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."*

Martin Luther King, Jr., went down still struggling against the forces of oppression. We are invited by his legacy to pick up the struggle again in our unique situations as 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians, being constantly on guard against oppression of all forms and facing down the attitudes in our hearts and communities that demand we wait rather than act.

And Martin Luther King, Jr.'s witness even speaks to our recent and ongoing controversies as a greater Church over human sexuality. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he writes about the sin of separation, and what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called substituting the "I-thou" relationship with "I-it," the denigration of a different kind of person to someone. . .or something. . .less than fully human. We are called instead to seek and serve what our baptismal covenant calls "face of Christ in all people," the "dignity of every human being," and that foundational vocation of Christianity in loving God and "loving our neighbors as ourselves."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we have not arrived yet as a Church. Jesus has not yet completed in us the miracle of changing our bland waters of complicity into the fine wine of everlasting life and salvation for all God's children. There is more to be done. I leave that for you to ponder this weekend in Christ's name, and in the name of Martin, one of his beloved disciples, even as I bid you rest and wish you peace.

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Before I close my sermon today, I want to address a very pressing sadness that has been on many of our hearts and minds this past week, and share with you another understanding of what it means that Jesus changes water into wine in today's Gospel.

Last Monday, a friend and classmate of several of our youth, Clive Barry, tragically took his own life. Like the chief steward in today's Gospel, I was the last in the know, hearing about it only this past Thursday and barely waking up yesterday to the impact this has had on our children and families. For this, I apologize, and I pledge to you that I will be more attentive to the life of this community in the future.

The loss of someone young, no matter what the circumstances, is an incredible blow to the soul and the heart. Even as I preach now, Este is meeting with our youth to open up conversation over this painful tragedy in our common life, and we have pledged to keep our doors open, cell phones on, and lights lit for anyone who wants a place to be heard. . .even if it is only a safe space to articulate those hard questions that seem to have no good answers.

We pray today for Clive, his rest in the infinitely gracious heart of God, and for his family, and for all those who have been touched in small and great ways by his death.

And I invite and encourage you to continue taking time this weekend to turn to each other and listen more intently than usual, to set aside the hectic business and pressures of our common life. . .a common life that is too often built on competition rather than compassion. . . and seek ways to rekindle and more deeply reflect that deep, honest love that we all yearn for in each other.

Do this all the more urgently if you have children. Our children are under enormous pressures today, and they need so much more than good grades and extra-curricular activities aplenty. They need our deepest sympathy and hearts attentive.

The water of tears in this community speaks to the heart of the Gospel and the heart of Christ. Tears shed for a terrible loss. Tears shed for pain unspoken and fears unhealed. Tears shed at the pain of lost conversation, a lost life, and that awful, hollow sense of things left undone.

It is the water of those tears that Christ turns to in us and in each other this day, and will turn with a tender touch into the joyous wines of eternal life, never leaving us in despair, and saving the best 'til last.

Hold that hope for each other as you pray and embrace each other: that hope for healing and a sign of God's greatness given to God's people for troubled times and troubled hearts.

My sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, may you continue to search for and find peace and may we only become a community of greater love for those in need. And I thank you for the humbling opportunity to share this journey with you, in good times and in bad.

Amen.