

Last Words

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Season of Reconciliation

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

January 20, 2013

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Text: John 2

There is a quirky sort of fact about the story from the Gospel of John that is the starting point for this sermon. I remember first becoming aware of this fact at a local clergy gathering in suburban Philadelphia when I was a pastor there in the mid-90s. A priest who was serving a Catholic parish there made a comment that connected to this story in John – I don't really recall the context or content of the conversation/discussion the group was having – but at some point the priest said something like: '...well, it's always best to follow the last words of Mary, right?' And I said 'the last words of Mary? – what do you mean?' I don't remember the priest's name now, but he was always entertaining and interesting to talk with, a tall read-headed Irish-man – so with a triumphant twinkle in his eye, very pleased that he could show his superior biblical knowledge over his protestant colleague, he said: 'at the wedding in Cana, Mary says - "do whatever he tells you" – and those are the last recorded words of Mary' I had to flip through my brain quick to think about it, but of course he's right – we have words FROM Mary during the birth narrative of Jesus – and then we hear ABOUT Mary at various times during Jesus' ministry and at the passion story of Jesus' death and resurrection – but this is the only other quote – the only and last

words that we have from Mary during Jesus' ministry. "Do whatever he tells you" - it's always best to follow the last words of Mary, my priest colleague said.

So what do you think of that? – it is a quirky kind of fact: these are the last recorded words of Mary, but obviously not how we usually think of "last words" - not the last words she spoke in her life. Is it fair to make much of what Mary says as her "last words", or to make anything of it at all? Well, in that respect, it's a bit of a match for the story as a whole – is there much to make of Jesus turning water into wine to keep some wedding guests happy? – anything to make of it at all? It is an odd miracle – if there is such a thing; perhaps an interesting story...a deft water into wine move from Jesus and nice treat for the wedding guests...but nothing too dramatic or deep that jumps out from it. But the text tells us to take it seriously, or significantly, at least - it concludes: 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.' This is the particular gospel of John language of a 'sign' for the miraculous acts of Jesus that we hear of throughout the Gospel – so it puts this story in good company - this story is no filler or back story—it is a first revealing of Jesus' glory which calls out belief from his followers.

And I suppose that can take us back to the observation of my friendly Philadelphia priest – if we are looking for significance, it may well be as good an entry point into the story as any to listen to Mary's last words: 'do whatever he tells you'. We can simply follow that path in this story and see where it leads - which in this story IS quite simple: Jesus tells the servants to fill 6 large stone jars, 20, 30 gallon jars, with water...they do; Jesus tells the servants to draw out some of the water and

take it to the chief steward (the master of ceremonies for the wedding celebration)...they do. And that's it! –the steward says 'what great wine!' - compliments the bridegroom 'very generous of you to serve good wine even when the guests are drunk' – and that's it: 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.' And I guess I would simply note that along with Mary and Jesus and the disciples all being in on what was going on, so were the servants – they were privy to and part of the miracle – “do whatever he tells you”...and they did.

Alright – I'm going to make what I expect will seem like an abrupt shift here – I want to share some words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as this weekend marks remembering and celebrating and perpetuating his life and legacy - pursuing racial justice and reconciliation, seeking social justice and peace, through the power of nonviolence. And the quote from Dr. King are something like his last words – they are the conclusion of his speech in Memphis, and the next day he was assassinated. You could call it again a quirky sort of designation as last words, and an unusual connection to the John story in that regard, but these did turn out to be his last public words, and they did turn out to have a profound significance to them as well. The entire speech in Memphis is remarkable – it's something of a summary of the long struggle for equality that MLK has become a leader of; it speaks of God's persistent call to justice and the enduring power of nonviolence that Jesus teaches. And he even speaks of the fear he and others deal with, attacked and threatened throughout this struggle - and then he concludes with these last words:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I

would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968

I am always profoundly moved by those words in their own right - and they are yet more profound and poignant in the tragedy that unfolds in his assassination the next day – he speaks of desiring to live a long life, but he’s not going to worry about it; he speaks of difficult challenges but being held by the vision and promise of God’s glory – no fear, happy in God’s care. And, Dr. King says, “I just want to do God’s will” – that is the simple summary of how he sees who he is and what he wants his life to be and to be about – “I just want to do God’s will”.

Mary says “do whatever he tells you” – Martin says “I just want to do God’s will”. When a servant listens to Jesus, and does what he says, miraculous things happen – Dr. King did what Jesus taught him, followed God’s will and way, and from one person the waters of justice and righteousness flowed like a might stream (maybe not water into wine, but a trickle into a roaring river 😊) – the miraculous transformation accomplished when MLK did what Jesus told him to do.

Now let me just say what may already be obvious to you: that this a highly symbolic sort of analogy, reading the text in this way – linking these words of Mary and the miracle at Cana to Dr. King’s words and his life. Is that far-fetched? – perhaps – but, to respectfully misuse a bit of Dr. Kings speech “*I’m not concerned about that now*”! Because I think this text invites such a reading. I mean, the story in John is a miracle

about providing wine for a wedding where the guests have already had plenty to drink! – an ordinary, unspectacular event...and yet told to point to Jesus' glory and the disciples' belief. So it seems evident to many and to me that there are clearly layers of symbol that the text invites us to explore.

And we can simply explore this: “do whatever he tells you”... Dr. King believed this is what Jesus told us: seek the justice of God's kingdom with the power of God's love; face the insidious violence of this world with the persistence witness of nonviolence; confront the powers of darkness with the glory of the coming of the Lord. Dr. King did what Jesus told him to do – in spite of circumstances or outcomes or opposition (opposition from outside the church and from within), MLK knew what Jesus told him to do. And miracles happened – people, communities, a nation changed for the better - water into wine? - transformation toward the beloved community of God.

Mary – Jesus – Martin...us? A simple miracle (is that an oxymoron?) at a wedding might not strike us as much to pay attention to. While a towering figure like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might cause us to think that he heard too high a calling for you or me – he inspires us, but also his epic life could distance us, or discourage us, or even excuse from seeing ourselves in anything like the same light. But really the calling is the same for you and me - do what Jesus tells you, do God's will – and when a servant does what Jesus says, there are miracles that reveal God's glory. No need to worry or fear, but believe that the miracle of God's kingdom takes shape through you – needs you, for God's glory to be revealed. Dr. King listened well to what Jesus tells us to do – justice, love, nonviolence, reconciliation, community – and it is the same for us,

each in different ways. In the small lives we lead, the daily choices we make, the work we do, the relationships we inhabit – AND in the grand visions to which we are joined – the kingdom of God is revealed.

Part of the mystery and challenge and grace of life is that we don't know when our last words will be. But these last words of Mary & MLK – “do whatever he tells you” - “I just want to do God's will” – they speak to us our calling as servants of Jesus Christ. And God does accomplish miracles – of life, of healing, of reconciliation, of hope – even through us. Thanks be to God. AMEN.