

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

January 17, 2010
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 2:1-11

Nudging the Divine

Toni Morrison was the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded in 1993. Among her works is a novel for which she received the Pulitzer Prize, entitled *Beloved*. It is the story of a woman named Sethe who lived her early life as a slave but who escaped across the Ohio River to live in Cincinnati.

She is pregnant when she runs away, and she's been wounded by a severe whipping. Hiding in the hills of Kentucky, she encounters a young white woman named Amy Denver, who dreams of escaping her own abused and impoverished life and moving to Boston. Amy prays as she rubs Sethe's swollen and sore bare feet, "Come here, Jesus." And then, when she gets a look at Sethe's back, she murmurs again, "Come here, Jesus." She lightly touches the raw and infected wounds, then finally speaks, describing what Sethe cannot see, only feel.

"It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder." (Morrison, 1987, *Beloved*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 78-79)

What did God have in mind? In this week when the world's attention has been focused on the suffering and loss being experienced in one of the world's poorest nations, Amy Denver's question and prayer have surely been echoed by millions. Come here, Jesus. What does God have in mind here?

The question of suffering is as old as the human race, and as fresh as this week's news. Why, Lord, should so many people of Haiti die when our nation in all its abundance is less than 700 miles away? Why are they so desperately poor to begin with, and why oh why did an earthquake strike a place where so few buildings were strong enough to withstand it, and existence for most people was already day-to-day, hand-to-mouth? If you are in charge here, God, what did you have in mind? And what do you have in mind now?

And on this day on which we remember the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it seems to me that Amy's prayer and question resonate within our nation's history and Dr. King's ministry within it. What did God have in mind when slavery was the norm, and later, when segregation and discrimination and poverty were accepted as "the way things are?" What does God have in mind now? Come here, Jesus, and help us.

So we look to the story of our Savior, seeking some answers. And in John's gospel, we hear beautiful words about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling with us, full of grace and truth. After this rapturous opening, chapter one tells us of Jesus' baptism and his gathering of disciples to follow him. There are no miracles or demonstrations of power or glory, and Jesus doesn't say much at all in this first chapter, but these disciples up and go with him. And then we come to the wedding scene in Cana. There's nothing about whose wedding it was, just that Jesus and his disciples and his mother are there. And after a

couple of days of partying, the wine is running out. The event is about to turn into a social disaster. But Jesus' mother knows something that no one else does. "Come here, Jesus," she asks.

"Woman, what does this have to do with you and me?" Now even though the biblical commentators all insist that this is not a rude reply on the part of Jesus, it certainly doesn't seem like a courteous answer to his mother. There's a problem here, Jesus, she says. The host is about to look really bad. You know how important it is to show hospitality to one's guests. You could fix this, I know you could. So, what are you going to do about it?

"My hour has not yet come." It's not time yet, he tells her. But then he proceeds to transform an enormous quantity of water into wine. The steward of the house doesn't realize what's happened, and he assumes that the host must have been storing wine in the water jars, saving it for the party. But the disciples see that it is a miracle, a sign of glory, and they remember that in the scriptures, abundant wine is always a sign of God's extravagant love and blessing. This must mean that Jesus is the Christ, and he is inaugurating a new era, a new reign, the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven! They believe.

This story is an uplifting testimony to God's abundant love made available in Christ. But doesn't it bother you just a little bit that Jesus was reluctant to display his gifts at first? And if God's abundance was available to those wedding guests, where was it for enslaved African Americans? And where is it for the people of Haiti right now, who'd be thrilled to have clean water, forget the wine!

In a week such as this one, and on a day such as this, I am with theologian Carol Lakey Hess when she observes, "It is passages like this one about divine extravagance that make God's absence in the face of poverty, suffering and evil stand out. How do we reconcile a story of potent generosity with a world of tremendous need?" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 262) Good question.

Surely Martin Luther King wrestled with this question. What did you have in mind, God? So over the last couple of weeks I have been reading and re-reading his sermons, searching for King's answer to the question of God's role in human suffering and injustice. For he knew injustice from the inside out. He knew suffering as part of the human condition, whether caused by sickness or by sin. He knew that God's earthly blessings are not distributed equally among God's children, that there are many who go to bed hungry while others throw food away, that clean water and adequate shelter and access to education and medical care are not made available to all. Not long before he died, he said in a sermon that he hoped that people would call him a "drum major for justice. . . . a drum major for peace. . . . a drum major for righteousness." He hoped that somebody someday would say that he "tried to live his life serving others." (from "the Drum Major Instinct," *A Testament of Hope*, James Melvin Washington, ed., Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1986, p. 267)

And what I found in all those sermons, over and over, was that his acknowledgment of present injustices was always answered by his conviction that God is on the side of justice. His view of the present was always influenced by his vision of God's future. His realism about what was wrong was always countered by his faith in what was right, so that even when he was speaking at the funeral of the four little girls who were killed in the bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, church in 1963, he could say to their families,

“Through it all, God walks with us. Never forget that God is able to lift you from fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.” (from “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” Washington, ed., p. 222)

King played an enormous role in our nation’s transformation from a place where discrimination was deemed acceptable to a place where the majority of Americans now say, both publicly and in the privacy of the voting booth, that color is no barrier to the highest office in the land. And I believe that the role he played parallels the role that Jesus’ mother played at that wedding scene long ago. She nudged Jesus into doing something to fix the situation. King nudged the nation into doing something to begin to right the wrongs of the past. “Come here, Jesus,” Mary said in so many words, and though he hesitated, he did respond. “Come here, Jesus,” said King in sermons and in secular speeches—make this nation more just and fair. And he called on us, the people, to carry out the transformation, because he believed in and inspired others to believe in the biblical vision of justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24, quoted often in King’s sermons) This vision is what God had in mind from the beginning, and still has in mind for us now.

So here’s the first thing the wedding scene at Cana shows us—sometimes Jesus needs a nudge! Our prayerful requests make a difference, for God listens to the cries of his people. And then God acts to transform simple things, like water into wine, and even more challenging things—like human hearts. But those prayerful requests usually need human cooperation to be fulfilled. “Fill the jars with water.” So they filled them up. And then the party could go on, and the disciples believed.

And here’s the second thing that the wedding story shows us—that God’s will is for us to live abundant lives, joyful lives, lives of community and sharing and goodness. Later, Jesus would take 5 loaves of bread and 2 fishes and make enough for five thousand people to eat. In this story he blesses people with abundant wine, a symbol of God’s extravagant love. What does God have in mind? This is one of the best pictures that Jesus draws for us of God’s desire.

And although God’s intended abundance is not yet present for all, and though tragedies and sin and evil still seem to be preventing it being fulfilled quickly, the vision is still alive of a world transformed by God’s abundant love. That’s what we’re here for, that is our purpose as God’s chosen ones—to share God’s abundant, extravagant love with the world. And maybe someday someone will say, “They tried to live their lives serving others.”

In few minutes we’ll sing James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” written more than 100 years ago and officially entered into the Congressional Record as the African American National Anthem 20 years ago. If you don’t know it, I hope you’ll pay attention to the words and the stirring music, and begin to own it as part of our shared national music. Before we leave today we’ll sing “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” which Marian Anderson claimed for all Americans when she sang it on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after the DAR refused to let her sing in Constitution Hall in 1939. Those days are past, thank God.

In the black preaching style which King knew so well, every sermon concludes with a celebration. It’s a celebration which arises out of suffering and pain, it’s a sharing of hope

and confidence that God is on the side of the poor and needy, it's a rehearsal of the joy and triumph which are promised to those who wait for the Lord. So for my conclusion this morning, I've picked from King's repertoire phrases which celebrate God's transforming promise and power, reason for celebration.

We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. . . . With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. (from "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution", Washington, ed., p. 277)

I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when there will be peace on earth and goodwill toward (all). It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the sons (and daughters) of God will shout for joy. (from "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," Washington, ed., p. 258)

How long? Not long, 'cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. . . . Oh, be swift, my soul to answer Him, be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on! (From "Our God is Marching On!" Washington, ed., p. 230)

God bless us all.