

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany/January 17, 2016

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When the news broke on Thursday that the Episcopal Church had been sanctioned by the leaders of the Anglican Communion, our son wrote to say "That's rough." A number of you emailed on Friday hoping for some future discussion, and I'll work on that with our Adult Christian Education Committee. The sanctions are the response of Anglican Primates (Archbishops and Presiding Bishops) to our church's decision at last summer's General Convention to create a marriage rite for same gendered couples. The sanctions mean that the Episcopal Church for three years will be excluded from ecumenical and interfaith bodies, from appointment or election to internal standing committees of the Communion, and from any decision making role regarding doctrine or polity.

For my part, I am actually proud that same gendered couples from our community can be married here at the altar of Saint Paul's. As you know this became permissible in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on May 20, 2014. Two days later, using the provisional service approved by the national church, our bishop gave permission for priests to solemnize marriages of same gendered couples. I am proud that Saint Paul's was among the first parishes in the diocese to celebrate the equality of all marriages.

This sermon follows the three parts of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee: first, "They have no wine;" second "Do whatever he tells you;" and third, "But you have kept the good wine until now." Because of the Martin Luther King Day of Service tomorrow it also has in view his Letter from the Birmingham Jail.

At the marriage in Cana Mary approaches her son and says, "They have no wine." Wine in the Bible is associated with peace, bounty, and wellbeing.

In communion wine is associated with the very presence of Christ. At a deep level the comment “They have no wine,” suggests a certain barrenness, emptiness, even injustice that would be made right when Jesus’ hour has come. There is more than a wedding that is being talked of here.

One might think of a nation or church or world that discriminates unjustly against others. “They have no wine.” Once in Massachusetts, which had already passed marriage equality though the church had not, I was asked to write a recommendation for a lawyer who was being considered for a judgeship. The application asked the lawyer to list any organizations he belonged to that were discriminatory. Because of its view on same-sex marriage at the time he had to answer “the church.” That stung.

In his Letter, Martin Luther King wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” he said, “tied in a single garment of destiny.” That is what the church means when it talks of catholicity. We are one body, mutually accountable and interdependent. One of the objections by the Primates of the worldwide Anglican Communion, is that the Episcopal Church acted to change its marriage policy without waiting until the Communion could act as a whole.

Should we have waited? Should Jesus have waited to fill the water jars until his hour had come? His hour would be the glory of the cross and resurrection. Should Martin Luther King have waited until the nation was ready for integration? He responded, “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’... Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’” No, the Episcopal Church had spent decades discerning its way to include its LGBTI members. In fact, one of our own parishioners nearly thirty years ago proposed to the national church that it affirm all “stable, loving and committed relationships” without discrimination due to sexual orientation. No, last year the time was ripe. There was no wine. Something had to be done.

Mary next tells the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” At the wedding miracle Jesus tells the servants to fill six large, stone, empty jars with water that would soon become wine. Today he continues to speak to us through

Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Jesus interprets scripture and listens to the Spirit. Once, when a lawyer tested Jesus on what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus responded, “What is written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?” So we have the job of interpreting scripture. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry does so in terms of Jesus’ hour that came when he was on the cross. He says, “Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on a social theory or capitulation to the ways of the culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all. While I understand,” he continued, “that many disagree with us, our decision regarding marriage is based on the belief that the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians are true for the church today: All who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.” Figuratively, one could say that some of the water became wine when marriage was opened to all.

We cannot simply stop at the statement “They have no wine.” We need to do what Jesus tells us. Work to create community that is open to all who love. Martin Luther King wrote: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God...” We need to work with Jesus who reaches out in love to everyone. Sometimes that puts us at odds with others. King continues, “One who breaks an unjust law (and we might add here a tradition) must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.” In the same way, our Presiding Bishop though expressing disappointment at the Primates’ sanctions reminds us that “we are still part of the Anglican Communion. We are the Episcopal Church,” he said, “and we are part of the Jesus Movement, and that Movement goes on, and our work goes on. And the truth is, it may be part of our vocation to help the Communion and to help many others to grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us, and we can one day be a Church and a Communion where all of God’s children are fully welcomed, where this is truly a house of prayer for all people.”

This brings us to the conclusion of the gospel passage. The chief steward of the marriage feast says of the water turned into wine: “But you have kept

the good wine until now.” The good wine comes unexpectedly at the end. Jesus, Martin Luther King wrote, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness. He was an extremist for the will of God that is the wellbeing of all. This wellbeing and peace is what the Bible tradition associates with “having wine.” When this love breaks into the church, when equality of marriage is recognized, when discrimination is replaced by freedom, when there is neither slave nor free, male and female, for all are one in Christ, when to act lovingly causes disruption and when we accept that people who disagree deeply may still stand together without diminishment before God at the altar of the church, then we with the chief steward may say, “But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Amen.