



**First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield**  
**429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330**  
***Creating Community, Welcoming All***

**January 16, 2022: Sermon** “Strangely Enough”

Rev. David Jones

“If [we] were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to [each of us], “[W]hich age would you like to live in?”--when would we say?

Dr. King imagined God asking him this question as he spoke at night before a crowd of striking sanitation workers, in front of fellow clergy and disciples rallying on Memphis in the spring of 1968. It was a chance for him to say that despite the danger, there was no place he’d rather be. And it was a chance for him to alert these workers and people of faith, that the fight underway in Memphis was as important—*more* important—than all these other great junctures in history.

If you listen to the audio recording of this sermon, you will hear the effect his words had on the people. Right from the beginning, they sense the answer that is coming, but they are patient, letting him lead them, as he moves from age to age, from surge in freedom to surge in freedom. King’s words are ennobling, but the gathered masses are already ennobled—they already have faith in what is happening in Memphis.

And King is answering truthfully. He is convinced the time has come when demands for freedom—from Johannesburg to Memphis—are now a matter of human survival. King is not glad to stand where and when he stands because there has been steady progress, because conditions have improved; “strangely enough,” as he says, he is glad to be in Memphis because the opposite has been the case. The world had gotten into a real mess by 1968; King describes the nation as “sick,” and says confusion and trouble are all around. But it is “only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.” King would tell God he’d be happy to live precisely when he did, because in the spring of 1968—that night in Memphis with the workers and the people of faith—the stars were shining bright.

Martin Luther King was shot and killed the next day.

In the Gospel according to John, we have suddenly been thrust into the ministry of a grown-up Jesus. After weeks of anticipation, and after 12 days of Christmas, after the truthful star rising in the east that took the wise men first to Bethlehem and then home by another road, suddenly we are at a wedding in Cana and Jesus is turning water into wine.

And this moment in this story when Jesus seems to snap at his mother for telling him the wine has run out—this is so jarring to read after spending so much time with the image of Jesus’ mother carrying and feeding him. There is a part of me, at least, that gets very annoyed by the way Jesus speaks here, addressing his own mother with such hostility.

But maybe he sees that his mother is pushing him; pushing him to act, to step out from hiding, to finally do the very things—to perform the acts of the Messiah—that may place him in danger, but are necessary if a new kind of kin-dom is to be realized. Where some parents, fearing for the wellbeing of their children, may try to talk them out of a risk or sacrifice, Jesus’ mother in John’s gospel does just the opposite. This is, after all, the mother who sang that her child came into this world for all those who are poor, not only for her.

The way Jesus snaps at his mother reminds me of the way any gentle person who is afraid or having doubts, can be capable of snapping at those he or she loves most. So full of love, so concerned and filled with compassion, such people are often unable to speak roughly to anyone—*unless* the person is so close to them, so trusted, that in a bad moment, with a simple lapse in judgment or in kindness, the loved one is taken for granted. Jesus replies roughly to his mother's concern and expectation; he takes out his fear on her.

But Mary is undeterred. She doesn't withdraw her concern about the wine. And she can interpret her son. He may not feel ready, but she knows it is time for the Messiah to appear—which may explain why Jesus is so on edge. Instead of appeasing him with an apology, or becoming upset or arguing, she just instructs the servers to wait until her son is ready. She knows that he will be ready soon.

And she is right. Immediately he asks the servers to fill the six jars with water. And the moment they are done, the servers, and then everyone at the wedding, make the happy discovery that the jars are not filled with water but somehow, miraculously, with wine. In the Gospel according to John, this is the first miracle of the Messiah.

Today we may be uneasy with this miracle for various reasons, but what is important to recognize here is that Jesus has transformed a potentially embarrassing situation for a newly wed couple and the hosts of the wedding, into a situation of unusual abundance. Like he will do with miracles of healing on the Sabbath, or when he overturns the tables of the moneychangers, Jesus is announcing that the kin-dom of God does not depend on ritual observances or strict dogma, but on God's love required. Since God is love, the kin-dom of God comes about when humanity marries love; when love is the vow of society, when all people care and support one another, and when no one is excluded or left behind. And the joy we will experience there, at this wedding between Creator and creature is not the joy of wine or spirits, rather it is the joy of people united in celebration. And this joy does not get worse with time—it does not degenerate into a lesser quality. With this love and this kind of celebration—at the wedding Jesus has come to share with us—the joy grows and grows without end. In the kin-dom of God, we are all siblings, all friends, and everyone will have what they need.

In this passage in the Gospel of John, the Messiah has been revealed. Though it is the second Sunday, now it really feels like the season of epiphany. All the things that have stood in the way of justice—scarcity, exclusion, inequality—*all* these things are being undone wherever Jesus will go. And they had to be undone, because Jesus had faith in the dignity of all people. Every man was a man; every woman, a woman. Every person had certain inalienable human rights, including the right to be filled with joy and to be included at the wedding with our Creator. It is not enough for people to be invited but unable to afford to attend, or to have to undergo purification simply because of who they are, how God made them to be. No, in the kin-dom of God that Jesus was bringing about, freedom meant bread and wine for all.

Now Memphis in 1968 was a little bigger than Cana. But the love of God was on the march just the same. Remember how King answered God's question; he was happy to be in Memphis, as holy a place as any in scripture. And there, the striking sanitation workers were like Mary. They had been organizing and taking action, and preparing for their liberation for a long time. It is the workers who forced King's hand, like Mary did to Jesus in Cana. It was time for the movement—the kin-dom of God—to take another step. King's dream was of a great wedding, where there would be no discrimination, where everyone—black and white—would all be invited. But the black workers in Memphis spoke up: "We have no wine." We can't afford to go. The invitation may have gone out to everyone in the form of new legislation, but the sender in America was insincere.

I don't know if King was uneasy or upset to find himself needed in Memphis, I don't know if he doubted that he should go. I just know that he showed up. It was time to turn the purifying waters of civil rights and de-segregation into the wine of good wages and safe working conditions. It was time to unite the sanitation workers, until their misery and need was transformed into joy and abundance.

Dr. King had the same shimmering faith in the inherent worth of every person that Christ did; the same faith in the great dignity of humankind. King had so much faith in you and in me, and in all the people he met, that it was worth it to fight for and to organize a new way of being. He was so persuaded by God's

goodness, by the beauty of Creation, that he could look on a world of segregation and prejudice, he could look on a country embroiled in violence at home and abroad, and strangely enough he could see signs of peace and justice for all; "only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." King saw the stars of dignity in the sanitation strike.

"If [we] were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to [each of us], "[W]hich age would you like to live in?"--when would we say?

I know we each can answer this question in many ways. But on Martin Luther King Sunday--and when folks gather tomorrow to observe his birthday as its own sacred day--I want to suggest that we answer with as much faith as he once did. As people of faith and good will, we are anointed by love to see the stars in the present darkness. God loves us now as much as ever. Ashfield and the hilltowns are as dear to God as Cana or Memphis. We belong to today whether it makes us happy or not. And faith is the same across time and space. It is seeing the stars of dignity in the fights for justice today. And the kin-dom is not different either; it is still an endless, inclusive celebration, marked by unexpected abundance and friendship shared with every guest. This time is as good as any to be divinely dissatisfied like Mary, like the sanitation workers, until every person--young and old, white and black--"*can have food and material necessities for their body, culture and education for their mind, freedom for their spirit.*"

Prophets like Martin Luther King do not condemn or reject us because we are sinful and try to force us to become something we are not; they do judge us--that is, they measure us according to the divine law of love--and they sentence us to our loving potential. They speak to us on behalf of God because they have seen that we still belong to the inclusive love of a beloved community; they have seen that the human family is truly a universal siblinghood, not scattered, divided neighborhoods. To be judged by Dr. King is only to be affirmed that if we have a destiny at all, it is to love one another always. It is to be encouraged that no matter where we are right now, we are always on the Way if we have faith in each other.

Strangely enough, when God asks each of us when we would like to live, from a thousand choices, it is our faith to hear this question at all that will force our hand; the only time we can choose is today.

Alleluia and amen.