

**January 17, 2010 – Second Sunday after Epiphany
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday – at La Mesa UCC
“The Best is Yet to Come”**

Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

Whenever a group of my clergy colleagues get together for whatever reason it doesn't take too long before we start telling stories about our respective congregations – war stories, as it were, about some of things that have happened to us recently in our attempts to “do” ministry. Now, while I know this may come as a shock to some of you, sometimes these stories take the form of complaints. “Can you believe what so and so said about this or that.” Or, “Do you know what they expect me to do about this situation or that problem – yahdah, yahdah, yahday.” Yes, sometimes we do complain.

But it's most enjoyable when clergy are able to laugh at themselves or remember funny stories of events or situations we have encountered in the rites and rituals of ministry. Among them weddings and funerals rank right up there as the funniest.

A colleague from my days back in Philadelphia tells the story of one of her first funerals – actually an internment at the cemetery on a winter day in February. The funeral director asked her, while en route to the gravesite, whether she would like a vial of sand to sprinkle on the coffin once it was lowered into the ground to enhance the symbolism and reality of words, “dust to dust, ashes to ashes, in the sure and present hope of the resurrection of the dead.” Initially she refused thinking such act would be rather maudlin and create even more grief for the bereaved. But when she began her the liturgy she changed her mind. Not having the sand the funeral director had offered her she thought she would just reach down and pick up a handful of the earth that had been dug out and heaped on a pile right next to the grave. What she hadn't taken into account was this was Philly. It was February. I think you get the picture. The ground was frozen solid.

So at the appointed moment she rather dramatically reached down and dug her fingernails into solid ground. To hear her version of the story – I imagine only slightly embellished – she at that point, now having become a slave to the symbol, put down her Book of Worship and before long was down on her hands and knees trying feverishly to pry loose a clod of earth from the mound. Now mind you, this was a pastor of an Evangelical and Reformed congregation of the United Church of Christ so she was in full clerical regalia – her Cossack and surplice were blowing in the wind as she finally dislodged a piece of the earth. Walking over the grave she dropped the symbolic “dust” onto the coffin which hit with such a thud that everyone there burst into laughter.

Now I can't beat that one when it comes to funerals – but weddings, my oh my, that's another story. I've had the best man pass out, the groom cry so hard he couldn't say his vows, the canine ring bearer bolt from the sanctuary – with the rings, as well as the boy-child ring bearer from hell. I've had a unity candle that would not light and a bride show up an hour and one-half late. One bride even tripped and fell over the white aisle runner all the while Wagner's processional played on, and countless parents not

speaking to one another – and all of this before the receptions ever got underway. Weddings – almost anything can and has gone wrong with them. One colleague has even said – “Weddings are accidents waiting to happen.”

Something almost always goes wrong at a service of holy matrimony and something is going wrong at this wedding in Cana of Galilee.

In those days the bride and groom celebrated the marriage not with a honeymoon but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom’s home. This celebration was in trouble, because the wine was giving out long before the party was over. The situation constitutes a crisis for the family that in Middle Eastern culture shoulders the responsibility for hospitality. It is the mother of Jesus who notices. She provides the leadership for this miraculous sign by observing the difficulty and taking action to help. Jesus hovers in the background as one who also had been invited and seems content to keep his distance at first. When his mother tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says, Jesus performs one of the most understated mighty acts, “Fill the jars with water. . . Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward – and viola – the best wine is now served to keep the party going.

The servants know what has happened, the steward is amazed, and the disciples believe in Jesus. How is that for a happy ending – a great story to tell his colleagues anyway – don’t you think? At the very least everyone seems to sense that the joyous feast has been saved.

Regardless of whether you attribute any veracity to this story there is an important lesson, I believe, that is hidden in the sequence of events. Moreover, the real point of this story was most likely completely missed by the majority of players involved, i.e., the invited guests. Just like we might run out to the store to get something we had forgotten while one of our parties continues – these guests may have had no idea what was going on behind the scenes. But they may have noticed one thing – the best wine was saved for those who didn’t make up an excuse in order to leave early. The best was saved for last.

At first I thought this text to be an odd one and missing any connection to our life today, specifically as it relates to the celebration of the life and teaching of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But the more I contemplated these words I began to wonder just how often we miss what is right in front of us. Eager for a solution – something better – a positive change, I wonder what we miss in our striving.

In reading many of the biblical stories, I’ve often felt that Jesus was a rather reluctant reformer – or at least, he didn’t seem to want to go in the same way those around him were pressing him to go. Even in this story, there seems to be a reluctance to be the solution to the problem. He even responds, when confronted by his mother, “They have no wine!” with a rather puzzling response. “What concern is that to me or to you?”

I have often wondered if Jesus didn't really want those gathered to pause and to reflect for a moment and ask – "What does this party really need? Does it really need wine?" Don't get me wrong, I would have been mortified if I were the host and the wine had run out. But this story does force me to ask the question, "What do we miss when we expect things to proceed the way they have always proceeded before?" I wonder if prophets like Jesus, like King – just might see the world a bit differently?

We're in a time of tremendous transition. I don't know what you are going through in your congregation's budgeting process, but we are struggling to make ends meet **and** to maintain all of our commitments to the outreach projects we hold dear, all the while increasing our commitment to our denomination through OCWM and Association dues.

But more than that, we are trying to think in new ways about what it means to be a prophetic voice in our community and beyond. We want to be advocates for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons specifically when it comes to equal rights for all in marriage. We want to continue taking stands for peace by encouraging our President and all legislators to say no to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan insisting that we cannot wage war in order to attain peace. We want to renew our efforts to ensure that every mouth is fed, every back is clothed, and every person provided adequate shelter and access to health care knowing full well that will mean sacrifice for most of us. In short, we want the best wine now – the problem solved – almost as if – viola – by miracle, by magic – it will all be taken care of by Messiah. I think perhaps this may have been the burden Jesus expressed in his initial comment to his mother. I wonder if this was not inherent in the frustration faced by King as **he** tried to do what was right?

We have precious little patience when it comes to solving problems and we certainly don't want to take the time to assess what we might learn when we are in the midst of transition from one phase to another. And so we are almost embarrassed to hear the response of Jesus sounding like a spoiled brat as he says to his mother, "So what's this problem got to do with me?" And we'd rather celebrate the oratory genius of King in the "I Have A Dream" speech but conveniently forget about all the harsh criticism he received as he spoke out passionately against the Viet Nam War. The best may be yet to come – but we want it now. And sometimes in our striving for the goal – we miss the prize being revealed in the present moment.

After the laughter had subsided at the graveside, my friend, now completely embarrassed and feeling like she had been a failure in her pastoral ministry to those in grief was instead embraced by family members. One even said, "Old Uncle Joe would have loved this. He was a practical joker – now we got the last laugh."

Dr. King realized, long before any of his colleagues, that he would have to glean his satisfaction in life not from reaching the Promised Land, that is to see civil rights granted to every African American living in this country. Instead, his peace came in knowing he had been faithful to the calling God placed upon him – to be a voice of justice at a time it needed to be heard more than any other.

While we may seek solutions to problems that surround us and while we should always keep our eyes on the prize, it is important that we, too, remain fully aware – fully cognizant of the struggle – the transformative process – as we seek a better day – a day when just possibly – the best is yet to come.

"Every now and then," Dr. King once said, "I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, 'What is it that I would want said?' And I leave the word to you this morning...."

"I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

If we truly focus on those things, I assure you, the best **is** yet to come.

Amen.