

Isaiah 62: 1-5
I Corinthians 12: 4-13
John 2: 1-11

The Coming Hour
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*What shall be the theme of the passing hour?
What shall be the measure of the song, what the strain?
Once more the circle's made wider and broader,
the household of faith have all met again.
Come, the feast is ready, while the table's loaded,
with the choicest fruit from afar and near,
while leaders and people, parents and children,
love and affection all are here.
All at home. All at home.*

I thought of this Shaker song (that I last sang in 1991) when I read the Gospel passage about the wedding feast at Cana...not so much because of the gathering for a feast, but because of that provoking question: "What shall be the theme of the passing hour?" In our story, when told by his mother that the supply of wine has failed, Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come." What sort of "hour," what sort of timetable, was he talking about? What sort of hour is passing us now? An hour of abundance or of need? Of peace or of conflict? Of purpose or of boredom?

In the Gospel of John, all this comes up in the setting of a happy gathering and a quiet miracle, which John calls the first of Jesus' signs, which revealed his glory. It is really a curious sort of miracle to start off with. It is not even clear that anyone there - except Jesus and Mary and the servants - knew what was going on...not much of a sign if no one sees it. And, at first glance it looks like a party trick. It's easier to feel good about the stories where someone is healed from a terrible disability like blindness or pain, or when hundreds of hungry people are fed with bread and fish, or when a widow's only son is raised from the dead. When Jesus touches the people who desperately need help, and their lives are changed, it is such a clear example of why he came to live among us. But when he just happens to be attending a wedding party, and the wine runs out, it is hard for us to believe that it was all **that** important for them to have more wine to carouse with. They don't seem so needy. Where's the need? What's the rush to get wine into those cups? Why did Jesus decide that **this** was the moment for action?

Here's another odd thing about this story: the scale of the miracle or sign is so out of proportion to the moment. Instead of filling a few wine jars, Jesus appropriates enormous stone jars used for ritual washing for a total of about 180 gallons. How big was this wedding feast, anyway? No matter how big or how long it lasted, this was a miracle of overflowing abundance. And this was the best wine ever: maybe \$200 a bottle wine. Think about the cost! By providing 700 bottles of the vineyard's fruit at \$200 dollars per liter, Jesus picked up a bill of \$140,000!

And then there's our general problem with miracles themselves. We have never seen these kinds of things happen, so we assume that they were mythical stories told to gullible people. But this brings me back to the question of time. In some ways, Jesus was just speeding time up with his

miracles. As C. S. Lewis wrote “God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and, with the aid of the sun, to turn that water into juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus ever year, from Noah’s time till ours, God turns water into wine.” The big difference in Cana is that Jesus speeded up this divine creativity, and did in a few minutes what God normally does over months and years. Jesus’ first sign was an indication that time itself would operate under new rules. The kingdom of God broke into our world, and it runs by a different clock. The kingdom of God has different rules.

The early church wrestled with all this newness. As the kingdom of God was preached by the Apostle Paul, the “circle was made wider and broader” as the Shaker song says. The household of faith would meet to feast, but not everyone was on the same page. Each one brought their own life story; each one brought their own gifts. In the city of Corinth, this meant chaos, fear, resentment and dysfunction as people struggled to live and worship and feast together as followers of Jesus. And some of their issues were “clock” issues. When should people start eating, when they gathered? When was it appropriate for people to sing or speak out in worship? What was the theme of the passing hour? How does a diverse group of people join together as the body of Christ?

And so we have Paul’s letter, telling them and us that individuality and diversity and difference are holy when joined by the One Spirit. Paul lists the gifts that were present in that congregation. I don’t think that it was meant to be the exhaustive list of spiritual gifts for all time. They were the tools that body needed for their passing hour to do the work of the kingdom, to keep them vital and primed to seek and embody the divine in the world.

I sometimes wonder what Paul would list as activities and gifts in this congregation, in this time. We would perhaps hope that the gift of discernment was here, as well as some wise utterances and good interpretation. We would perhaps hope for prophetic speech and actions to be on the list. But we also need, as part of our joined-up body, people with the gift of welcoming, people with the gift of intercessory prayer, people with the gift of strategy, people with the gift of cooking and building and gardening. I can’t list all the gifts you display and that you hope to find here, but I pray that you will offer them up as a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Time-wise, we are at the beginning of a New Year. Time-wise, we are approaching our Annual Meeting, with the prospect of changing our church structure so that each person’s gift will be manifest. Time-wise, we are on the Sunday before Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birthday. But what is the coming “hour” for our congregation? What is calling us, what need is before us, what opportunity for energy and graciousness is here that might be as surprising as stone jars filled with expensive wine?

The fact that it is this particular weekend, MLK’s birthday weekend, makes me think of the urgent moral issues that face our society today. 50 years ago, some people were telling Dr. King to slow down. He referred to this in a sermon when he talked about “the myth of time.” He said, “It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And there are those who often sincerely say to the Negro and his allies in the white community, “Why don’t you slow up? Stop pushing things so fast. Only time can solve the problem. And if you will just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out.”

We know today, that, though many things have changed over the decades, the shame and the burden of racial injustice is still with us. We experience this as discomfort and anger and tension.

We see its expression in the Black Lives Matter movement. We see it separate honest and sincere people through us-or-them rhetoric. In our time, in the coming hour, it will take all of our gifts to follow in the way of Jesus, who refused to exclude or scapegoat. It will take all of our gifts to be a place of both prophetic witness and civil dialogue. The Good News is that a faithful church is uniquely gifted to both discern and to act on the themes of the passing hour. The Good News is that God loves us, refuses to let us go, and invites us, together with all friends and strangers and enemies, to a miraculous and joyful feast.

I want to say that the Cana story is not the most miraculous reading we had today. It is that image Paul gives us – whenever it is lived out – of a diverse and unified body. That is the everyday miracle we have the potential to experience. Maybe it has happened here before, when the hour was right. Maybe it will happen here again, when the hour of need is upon us. Maybe it will happen outside of these walls, if we trust in the signs and promises of God.

I also have to say that, for a preacher, it is very difficult to speak today without wanting to quote wholesale from Dr. King's sermons. He had the gift of eloquence that is truly rare, and that was put to the use of the needs of the civil rights hour. But we are right to echo his words today, because they give us hope that, as he said, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

And so I close with King's words to fuel our determination to hasten the hour of freedom, peace and justice. He wrote:

"But, the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men and women."

And he wrote:

"Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

And he wrote:

"We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."

Amen. May it be so. Amen.