

Sermon for 2 Epiphany—January 17, 2010

The title of this sermon could be “180 gallons of water=180 gallons of wine=180 gallons of grace. If you have not seen the movie “*Babette’s Feast*,” and you are having difficulty understanding why this miracle is included in John’s Gospel as a sign of the kingdom and Jesus’ first miracle, I suggest you see it. In this simple story of a stranger who becomes a house hold servant in the home of two sisters intent on keeping a parish family together after their father, the local Lutheran pastor has died in a tiny, desolate village of the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark. Without giving away the story, this Babette transforms this community as she offers her faith in the promise that life can have more substance to it than they have ever known before.

The setting of our Biblical story is a Jewish wedding. Jewish weddings at the time of Jesus usually began on Tuesday evening. The groom and his friends would go over to the bride’s home. The guys would gather in front of her home swinging their oil lamps. The bride would come out and, for the first time in her adult life, remove her veil. The groomsmen would then return to the groom’s home and begin a seven-day party. In today’s Scripture, we find Jesus and his mother at one of these seven-day wedding parties with his disciples.

What happens at this party? The host becomes embarrassed because he runs out of wine. Mary wants Jesus to do something to fix this problem. He asks to servants to bring out six huge, 30-gallon jugs, used for the rite of purification. This water was used not as drinking water, but only a small of water would be used to wash one’s face, hands, and feet before worship. At this ritual cleansing only a cup would be needed to purify hundred men, in order for them to get close to God in worship. Symbolically in using these purification jars, 180 gallons of guilt become 180 gallons of grace, enough for the whole world. From God’s fullness of grace, we have all received grace upon grace.

As *Babette’s Feast*, also a tale of God’s grace, changed the lives of the community she served, so Jesus changed the lives of those who he encountered. Jesus invites us to do the same. As the late twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said about his generation “Christianity has not be tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.”

In writing about leadership in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King day tomorrow, the Rev. Donald Whipple Fox, a Lakota Sioux, says that the hunter in Lakota tradition, is a great leader because he offers his gifts to the people. To think of oneself first would foster the breakdown of the community's survival and identity.

“Like other gifts, (Fox says) leadership must be shared with the community. To not allow that potential to break forth is a denial of the transforming power of the Good News that is Jesus Christ. To not foster leadership in oneself is quenching the light.” This does not mean that all are called to be the same kind of leader. Indeed, it may mean discerning one's leadership in a small essential role. I know of many women and men whose

ministry of serving coffee and cookies with sincerity and love has outshone the greatest of sermons and liturgy.”

“Leadership, however, is such a fragile gift. While ideal leadership is intended for the well-being and good of the community, too many of us know the ill effects of poor or bad leadership. Whereas good leadership involves authority and sharing, bad leadership is based in power and control. Being a leader should always be involved with those sometimes painful issues of justice and reconciliation. It puts one in the spotlight and calls for one to advocate for the rights and well-being of the whole community, but not to the detriment of individuals. It's a balancing act that is often seen as unrewarding and lonely. It involves giving up self-interest to true humility and respect. ...”

As he also says: “True leadership does not stem from naming the enemy abroad and among us. True leadership involves listening to all of God's people and learning to put others in front of oneself. True leadership requires justice for all of God's creation. Only by helping the entire community and creation, our extended community, can one help oneself. Jesus' acts of leadership are dynamic and show forth the transforming power that is inherent in all of us. May we and our world that is parched for justice continue to lift up the divine gift of true and sincere leadership.”

May we pray that the leadership elected by this parish family at our annual meeting reflect the transforming power of Jesus as reflected in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.