

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Epiphany

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Christ Church, Andover

Jeffrey Gill

John 2:1-11 – The miracle at Cana of Galilee

A number of years ago when I was a graduate student at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy one of the people I studied with was Rabbi Marc Gopin. Professor Gopin talked a lot about – and was a masterful practitioner of – the art of the counter-intuitive gesture. What that means is “doing the very thing people least expect you to do.” He saw this not merely as a tactic to throw people off balance, but as a signal that the terms of the negotiation may not be what you expected, and at an even deeper level, that I recognize the humanity in you, just as I hope you will recognize the humanity in me. So, for example, he, as a Jewish rabbi, would go into a conflict resolution meeting with Palestinians and start by offering his profound sorrow and deep regret for the deaths that had recently taken place in a raid on a Palestinian refugee camp by Israeli Defense Forces. It was not what people expected. Or, he would work together with an imam to create a show of unity during a time when religious tensions were high. Or he loved to tell the story of a radical settler rabbi in the West Bank who regularly flew the Palestinian flag on top of his synagogue to say that yes, I am a Jewish Palestinian. Counter-intuitive indeed.

Some of you may have seen the movie titled *Invictus*. It’s the story of Nelson Mandela in the days after his election as the first black president of South Africa. Mandela knew he had a challenge. A new South Africa had been born. Now he had to create new South Africans. South Africa’s overwhelming black majority had elected him President, but the now largely alienated white Afrikaners still had control of the country’s wealth and weapons, enough to endanger this fragile democracy if they felt threatened. But Mandela was a masterful reconciler. Finding common ground would be difficult, and almost no one could have predicted that it would be found on a rugby field. After all, this was the sport that symbolized white Afrikaner brutality. It was, as one writer put it, “the secular

religion of the Afrikaners, the white tribe that invented and enforced apartheid. It was a sport that most blacks considered — if they considered it at all — ‘the brutish, alien pastime of a brutish, alien people.’” But Mandela did what no one could have predicted. He offered to host the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa. A counter-intuitive gesture, to be sure. Much of the world had fought to boycott South Africa’s rugby team in support for the anti-apartheid struggle; and now Mandela did the opposite, reaching out his hand across a vast cultural divide as if to say, we are one people. We’re all South Africans. This was his way of saying to the defeated minority, “there’s a rightful place for you in the new order.” And furthermore, he sought to transform black South Africans into enthusiasts for the sport “by lending his personal charisma to the loathed sport and by mobilizing all races in pursuit of a world championship.”¹

It was a highly symbolic gesture in the transformation of a divided society, and it would go a long way in building a new sense of national identity and shared pride among former enemies.

In the gospel today, Jesus performs a “counter-intuitive gesture” – something no one expected or could have predicted, and something that would alter perceptions and change the terms of their expectations.

It was an ordinary enough occasion, in a fairly insignificant location. Jesus was at a wedding in a small village called Cana, not far from Nazareth. It was the kind of event that everyone in the Galilean countryside would show up for. You didn’t get a written invitation, but word went out and people gathered from the surrounding villages for a party that would take place over a period of seven days. It was a community celebration. And, of course, a family did everything they could to show their finest hospitality on such an important occasion. “To run short of wine would be a serious embarrassment for the host parents and newlyweds... [and] we can be sure that a community would long remember the shame of a family that failed to provide adequate wine for a wedding.”

¹ New York Times movie review at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/17/books/review/Keller-t.html>.

So, you can just imagine Jesus hearing his mother come over to him and say to him, “they have no wine.” You can just see him, like a lot of sons, rolling his eyes, embarrassed that she would be inserting herself into this situation. And not wanting to create a scene he says between his teeth, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” “Don’t go and create a scene, Mother! You’re only going to embarrass everyone, including me!” Mo-o-om!

But he follows that with another statement. “My hour has not yet come.” That seems like an odd thing to say! And yet, perhaps it was just in hearing himself say those words that something happened. It was as if a lightbulb went on. “Why not?! This is the moment! My time *has* come.”

Meanwhile, Mary is ignoring his objections, but sensing that he is ready after all. She kicks into gear. She tells everyone standing around to do whatever Jesus asks them to do. And Jesus immediately orders them to take six big stone jars and fill them with water. When they have done that he tells them to draw some out and give it to the chief steward, the guy in charge of the wine for the occasion. So they took it to the steward, and the steward... was... amazed. This wine was better than the first!

Ordinarily, the best wine is served first. And after everyone is drunk then they can bring out the cheap stuff. But this was different! The potential embarrassment and shame of this family had been transformed into an occasion for celebration! An incomprehensible gift had been given – and for no apparent reason. And in this miracle, the first of Jesus’ signs, we are told that “he revealed his glory.”

Jesus’ counter-intuitive gesture opened up a whole new world! It’s a world where the normal rules about getting what you deserve just don’t apply anymore! We don’t get what we deserve, but so so much more! It’s a world that is imbued with the divine grace, such that the logic of human justice is turned on its head.

This “glory” that is revealed in Jesus at the wedding in Cana, is the same glory that is and always has been at the heart of creation, but that has been so badly obscured by a wayward humanity. It’s always there, however, and always seeking

to manifest itself in ways that open our hearts and our minds and our eyes to the reality of God's presence among us. That's what this Epiphany season is all about.

It's a coincidence in some ways (ah, but maybe not!) that Martin Luther King Day falls in this season of Epiphany. His life and ministry reveal something of this glory. And interestingly, it was also through *his* use of the counter-intuitive gesture that we see a new world beginning to emerge. In a time when white police officers across the south enforced the Jim Crow laws with a kind of brutality and inhumanity that normally would have provoked the most violent response, Martin and others who joined his movement were training people all across the south, in church basements and homes, through sermons and talks, not to fight violence with violence, but with an infinitely greater power – the power of love. Using biblical images of the people of Israel coming out of slavery in Egypt, and the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus told the people to turn the other cheek and to love your enemies, Martin Luther King created a non-violent movement for social change that would alter the terms of social discourse, and create a modern-day model for turning water into wine. He proved that history is not an inexorable descent to the bottom, but that in fact, the better wine can indeed come after the inferior.

This week we have all had our hearts broken as we have witnessed the devastation in Haiti. The world is crying for the suffering people of that island nation. Even as the world has stopped and reached out to lend a hand to the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, it's sad that from some so-called Christians we have heard examples of some of the most backward thinking you can imagine. Pat Robertson has said that Haiti made a pact with the devil and is under a curse. What an example of the kind of "you get what you deserve" thinking that Jesus put the lie to. I believe that this is a moment for God's glory to shine, in how we reach out to help transform a nation, turning water into wine, showing that its best days are ahead of it, not irretrievably lost in a distant past. And remarkably, in spite of all the logistical problems following a disaster such as this, people ARE reaching out. They're making the counter-intuitive gesture, pouring their hearts and souls and their money into helping people in desperate need. Pat Robertson wants us to believe we'd be wasting our money and even

our good intentions. The good news that Jesus came to bring is that miracles happen, and that the best is yet to come.

The miracle at Cana invites us into a new way of seeing and a new way of being. It's a way where we get not what we deserve, but so much more. It's a way that calls us to expect that our weaknesses and our embarrassments and our tragedies can actually be transformed into something new, something even greater than we could ask or imagine. It's a way that calls us to reflect that same glory in our own lives and in our actions.