John 2:1-11
January 17, 2016
The Church of the Pilgrimage

Poked and Prodded

I have always loved this text from John, the story of the wedding at Cana, Jesus turning water into wine. It’s such an engaging story, a story of a family’s embarrassment and shame corrected by Jesus acting with compassion, a story of scarcity overcome by abundance, of anxiety overcome by joy. It’s also a story that reminds us that God does not reside in the world just in church on Sunday, but in every place where people meet, in every place where grace abounds.

But this week I decided there was something new to love: that being Jesus mother Mary, and the role she has in the way things played out. This is not the Mary of the birth narratives, a young peasant woman saying yes, or a young mother fleeing to Egypt so as to keep her precious child alive. This is an older Mary, the mother of a grown son. And she is persistent. “They have no wine” she says and when he expresses both reluctance and perhaps a certain grumpiness (“Woman, what does that have to do with you and with me? My time has not yet come”) Mary does not take no for an answer, or, rather, she believes that her son, now sufficiently poked and prodded by his mom, will do the right thing. “Do whatever he tells you” she tells the servants, because she believes despite protests in her direction Jesus being Jesus will respond with compassion, and turn this sorry situation around.

As Epiphany texts go, this one is about not hiding your light under a bushel. Jesus seems like he’d just as soon do that, but Mom, Mother, says come on now, It’s time. There’s no time like now to do the right thing.
And that, it seems to me, is a fine message for this day, for this weekend in which we remember and celebrate the life and the vision of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. For one of the struggles in Reverend King’s life was the extent to which so many politicians, community leaders, and white pastors encouraged him to wait, to hold off, to push hard for civil rights at some other time, some time in the future. But King said no to that. There is no time like the present to address what needs to be addressed. There is, as King said, the fierce urgency of now.

And it’s certainly been a year to feel that, the fierce urgency of now. Account after account of young black men, unarmed, shot and killed by police. Footage of the officer approaching Sandra Bland and the escalation that occurs. And yet the Black Lives Matter movement has engendered considerable resistance and debate. A clergywoman in a group I attend shared how her Cape Cod church had a banner that first proclaimed “Black Lives Matter” only to adjust it to “All Lives Matter” and then eventually, to take that down and embark first upon a reflection about racism in their own community, because both banners created so much fuss there was clearly a nerve being tapped into.

As many of you know, yesterday was the Martin Luther King, Jr day of service. Over sixty people gathered at Zion Lutheran Church to help assemble care kits – 550 hygiene kits sent to local food pantries 320 snack kits to be delivered to hungry local school kids and 121 comfort kits – socks, hand and footwarmers, chapsticks, snacks and gum for Plymouth area homeless individuals. The energy in the room was happy chaos – kids, teenagers, older people all working together, talking, bagging, boxing, writing notes of encouragement. The happy buzz of people engaging in service.

After the project was over, we climbed upstairs at the Loring Center to sit around card tables for an experience known as world café. We were asked a question, and given time to reflect upon it conversing with the three other people at our table. And if it helped us listen, if we were happier drawing pictures, or words, there was large paper on our tables and colored pens for that. After fifteen minutes or so, one person could stay at the table,
but the other three had to get up and move, settling into other tables with other people for the next round. a way of making sure we had practice listening to lots of people in the course of the dialogue. The questions were about King’s vision, and where it spoke to today. How would we act to put that vision into action? How would we show love out on the streets?

At one sitting, there was at my table a woman named Kristen from Second Church in Manomet who told a story about going out to dinner with friends of hers who happened to be Latino and African American. We were in the city, in the North end of Boston, she said. And I noticed that both on the street, and in the restaurant, people were looking at them funny. We waited for a table and they seated several parties ahead of us. I got to thinking that I really had no idea how differently the world meets you, treats you, when you are a person of color. But my friends deal with that every day. Her story reminded me of a night ten or fifteen years ago when Mike and I, living in Philadelphia at the time, went into the city with friends who ours – a gay couple who had been together for many years. As we walked down the street together, someone yelled something rude and offensive in their direction. The bothersome thing was they weren’t that bothered. Out in the world they had encountered that kind of thing quite regularly.

In the conversation I took part in yesterday no one at the tables I sat at said general things like “we are all the same.” “We should all just get along.” There seemed to be a growing awareness that white experience in this country and black experience are two very different things.

My take away from the conversations yesterday is that it is very life giving, and very hopeful in this day and age to be in conversation with people about things that matter. In a week of hyperfocus on Powerball and in a season of such heated and such uncivil public debate, it felt good to be gathered in such a diverse religions crowd – UCC’ers and Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and members of synagogue Beth Jacob – young people and older people, we were coming together across some of the divisions, talking about things that matter. I could not help but think that Dr. King would have smiled at our gathering yesterday and at the worship service that will bring people from the greater Plymouth area together tomorrow morning too.
People coming together, finding ways to be the beloved community, was what King was all about.

But I don’t want to get too far away from Mary, Jesus mother. I don’t want to get away from being poked and prodded. Because that was also what King was about. King felt the call to poke and prod America’s conscience. It wasn’t all about the Dream. It wasn’t all great oratory. It was about being arrested, having hoses turned on you, dogs set after you, blows directed upon you. It was about facing the violence of a system that did not want to change. It was about the march on Washington but also about marching across the Edmund Pettus bridge.

This winter I’ve been reading *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nahesi Coates, a fine journalist who is a regular writer for *Atlantic* magazine. Coates is writing a letter to his teenage son, reflecting upon what it means to inhabit a black body in America today. What provoked Coates to write the book was his son going into his bedroom to weep when the police shooting of Michael Brown led to no indictment. Coates speaks of his own growing up, of a father that would beat him into submission before the police could do that and of attending Howard University, the first time and place in his life where being black was the norm, where being black was something he began to feel proud of.

Coates also speaks of reading in the newspaper that a friend of his from Howard, Prince Jones, had been killed by the Prince George’s County Police. He reflects upon the death of his friend saying to his son “what you first learned from Michael Brown I learned from Prince Jones.” Which is what?
That you cannot count on justice. That you will be pulled over while driving black. That people you know will die in violent ways, that you too may die. He warns his son “you have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.” *(p. 107, Between the World and Me)*
Coates book makes me think of the difference between being non racist and anti racist.
Non racist means we can sleep easy at night because we are not ourselves actively oppressing another.
Anti racist means we are more intentional, that we find ways to actively fight racism in our society.

I have not found reading Coates book easy.
It pricks my conscience, and the part of me that would like to think that we might converse our way to a saner society is left wondering if that is really enough.
But I think it is valuable, and an important first step, to read about life experience that is different than our own.
Only when we truly listen and understand what it is to face the world as a person of color will we be able to be part of the solution, part of the healing, part of the needed transformation.

I wonder: what would it be for our congregation to read this book during Lent? I guarantee you it will not bring about a Ho Hum response.
What would it mean for us to covenant to think about race a little more deeply?
Might be something to think about.
And if we feel a push back – shouldn’t we be reading something spiritual for Lent – isn’t this topic too political –
perhaps we need the reminder that being spiritual ought never mean we are cut off from the world’s realities, or from our brothers and sisters.
We can always have our minds expanded, our hearts made stronger with compassion and with that hunger for justice that so marked Dr. King’s words and actions
his life lived as an offering for a better world.

This year, as Lent draws near, I hope we will think about how to intentionally work towards the beloved community that was part of his dream,
and towards the justice that is an essential part of that dream.
Dr. King said “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards Justice.”
May we be part of that movement, that bending towards both our better selves, and a better world.

Amen.