

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
2800 Archwood Avenue - Cleveland, OH 44109**

**Rev. Dr. David Bahr
archpastor@aol.com**

**John 2: 1-11
"Trivial to Whom?"**

**Martin Luther King Sunday
January 14, 2007**

I was reading something powerful this week that I wanted to share with you. The war "has frustrated our development at home by telling our underprivileged citizens that we place insatiable military demands above their most crucial needs. It has exacerbated the hatreds between continents, and worse still, between races. The bombs that fall explode at home. It does not take much to see what great damage this war has done to the image of our nation. It has left our country politically and morally isolated in the world, where our only friends happen to be puppet nations. The major allies in the world that have been with us in war and peace are not with us in this war. As a result we find ourselves socially and politically isolated."

Choose one of the following: Was this from one of the new Democrats in Washington, such as Nancy Pelosi? Was this from the head of one of the mainline Christian denominations, such as our own John Thomas? From a think tank; a Republican? Anyone know? It's Martin Luther King, in 1967, to the national convention of the American Psychological Association. Eerie, isn't it?

We're in the midst of a sad repetition of history. This weekend we will rightly hear repeated references to "I Have a Dream" and renewed appeals for a "color-blind" society. But, as Dr. Glenn Loury, the director of the Institute on Race and Social Division and a professor at Boston University, said about the annual celebration of Dr. King's life: "What we get today is the King of that 1963 speech, not the King of the 1967 opposition to the Vietnam War, not the King of the 1968 poor peoples' campaign," and, depending on who is speaking of his legacy, not the King who would be leading a campaign today using the same speech he gave 40 years ago about war. That's because the grand vision of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has too often been domesticated. On his website, even Jerry Falwell praises King for having a dream. There is nothing there, however, about

any of Jerry's hate-filled rhetoric against Dr. King 40 years ago – or, how so much of his dream remains unfulfilled. Today it seems everyone, right wing to left wing, can find something to like – or rather, something to use for their own agenda, to domesticate him – to control his legacy.

Today's praise is ironic given the criticism that abounded in his time, from everyone, right wing to left wing, from Richard Nixon to fellow African Americans. White liberals thought he was becoming too extreme, cautioning him for patience. "He should do this and not that." "He should focus on this and not that." When he began criticizing the war, his supporters told him he was "squandering his moral mandate" by not focusing exclusively on problems of race. It's as though Jesus asked his mother, "What concern is that to you and to me?"

Anti-war activists today, while applauding King's 1967 speech about the Vietnam War, best not forget the rest of the speech: "White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism...there is little depth to the changes" from laws that granted voting rights. "The decade of 1955-1965, with its constructive elements, misled us," he said. He noted that the urban riots that followed exposed the continued injustice that lay below the surface papered by constitutional amendments and congressional actions. Why are people so angry? These matters have been solved. War and poverty, racial justice in urban policy and prison populations, school segregation and employment discrimination, things that Dr. King addressed, and even slavery, are matters of history, right?

We've established that the same words about war that Dr. King spoke in 1967 could have been read in today's Plain Dealer. We certainly know that poverty is not history, though any real and sustained efforts to *address* it – *real* effort to address it – are mostly history. But certainly the problem of racial justice has been solved. We can stop talking about it now (that what it sounds like out there, doesn't it?). 350 years of slavery on American soil, 100 more years of lynching and Jim Crow... And people are impatient that 40 years of voting rights should have fixed all the problems of race! It's been 40 years - get over it and on with it, we're told. Michigan just banned affirmative action because it's "unfair" – and maybe slavery was just a figment of their imagination too.

There are those who think the struggle for racial justice is about history – Let's declare Dr. King's dream of a colorblind society fulfilled. Just don't look at the color of the residents of our prisons, or their prospects when searching for jobs with a record. Don't look at the color of the teenagers that *don't* have to go before the juvenile court judge. "White flight" is a thing of the past, right? I have watched literally dozens of for sale signs go up in the last two years on one suburban street. The overnight change has been astonishing. I'd love to ask them, "Where are you going?" and more truthfully, "What are you afraid of?" I guess we could say its progress that the new residents haven't have their

windows bombed out like my family, the first African American residents 30 years ago, ancient history and all. But what concern is that to you and to me?

They ran out of wine at the wedding banquet. Jesus said to his mother, "What concern is that to you and to me?" I've always been curious about that remark. Is he criticizing her for telling him that they had run out of wine? She knows he's going to do something anyway – notice, she doesn't even respond to his comment, she just whispers to the servants, "Do whatever he says," obviously knowing Jesus is going to take care of it, somehow. So, if he's just going to take care of it, why this response to her? What does the gospel of John want us to get? What are we supposed to understand? John could have just stated the problem – there was a wedding banquet with a lack of wine – and then told us how Jesus fixed it with a miracle and finished the story with the same ending – it was a sign that caused his disciples to believe. Move on. Problem solved. The point of the story still could be made – it's one of the signs that revealed that he is the Messiah. In the progression of signs, first it was the magi following the star, then it was dove descending and the voice of God in his baptism, and now, the first for his disciples to see, he has turned water into wine. They are signs. They are epiphanies – moments of clarity, increasing moments of "ah-ha." This is who he is. The gospel of John reveals piece by piece the significance of his life for the world.

So what are we supposed to get from this comment to his mother? It bugs me – sitting there in the middle of the story. Why is it there? Basically he said to her, why are you bothering me? It's trivial. To say something is trivial means it's unimportant, inconsequential... It's not worth mentioning, it's not worth worrying about; it's a petty detail, it's frivolous, trifling. Something that's trifling is silly. If John is trying to reveal the significance of Jesus, why does he have Jesus make a comment that is so insignificant, so trivial? But, we have to ask, for whom is it trivial? Who does this matter for?

It's the same response I have for those for whom the civil rights movement is a category in the game of Trivial Pursuit. Racial justice, and the exasperating ways it is hidden in our institutional structures, is not trivial. Some people act like it's trivial. When it doesn't affect them, lots of us can claim that an issue isn't worth bothering over. Get over it. Move on. But for whom is it trivial? Just like mental illness is not trivial, the shocking increase of AIDS among young gay men is not trivial, the number of people in Cleveland without a high school diploma is not trivial, the loss of polar bear habitat is not trivial, a warm winter is not trivial, Indian treaties broken 100 years ago is not trivial, second-class citizenship for people who want to marry is not trivial – not for those for whom it is real.

And a wedding banquet without wine was not a trifling, silly matter. It had great consequence. Such a dilemma would be the scandal of the town. One's status

in the community was completely dependent on the hospitality shown at a wedding banquet. For the guests, to run out of wine was more than a disappointment; it was a basic breakdown in relation to a social duty that established the host as either an honorable or a disgraced member of society. The host who ran out of wine was in danger of far more than being regarded as a party pooper or a tightwad; this kind of social failure was a complete loss of face from which one might never recover, and the stigma could last into the family for generations. (I can recognize this pain: My father suffered the continued consequences of a social disgrace by my great-grandparents for attending the wrong church.)

The hospitality shown at a wedding was not a trivial matter, not for those for whom it is real – and obviously, by their relationship, it wasn't for Jesus either. Here's the lesson. Jesus' miracle saved that family from disgrace, from being social outcasts which, frankly, reveals more to me about Jesus as a person than any miracle about water into wine. It tells me who he really is; what he really cares about. And why I am his disciple. You know, until I studied more about this passage, I didn't know the significance of a wedding without wine. To me it was trivial. I just want a potluck picnic at my wedding. But now I know someone's story. I can't say it's trivial; I can't judge. I can't tell you that you shouldn't be afraid of the dark. For you, it's not trivial. I can't tell you that you shouldn't worry about some petty detail. For you, it's not trivial. And Jesus cares too. Though he asked, more importantly, he acted.

It's easy to judge things as not really important when we have no personal contact – one of the dangers of segregated cities and separated churches. Before I had loved ones whose brothers and fathers and children were in prison, or developed relationships with people who are now my friends who have been in prison, the conditions or make-up of the populations there seemed to be of little concern to me. What did it really matter? And before I went to Haiti and made friends, our government's foreign policies seemed to be of little concern to me. I just wanted to do good and, naively, thought our government did too. Before Art's mother disappeared in the night, reports on the news of someone's missing mother was sad news, but now my heart aches each time in a different way. I *know* their story.

Like what can happen to Dr. King's legacy, our own concerns can become domesticated. We are more easily concerned with what affects us directly and most immediately. It's easy to judge other's issues as unimportant, inconsequential. Or, to say, "gee, that's too bad," but wonder why it causes such horrendous grief. Everyone experiences grief over the death of a loved one - why is this so awful for you? That's why Iraqi deaths seem important, but not urgent. That's why the economic prospects of ex-convicts returning home seem sad, but not outrageous. That's why this church is so essential. Do we really

recognize how blessed we are? We can take Archwood for granted, but where else would this group of people come together and share such broad concern. But here we have relationships across race and ethnicity – racism is not someone else’s problem; we have friends of all sexual and gender orientations – we know the issue of being denied a visit to our partner in the hospital is not trivial; here we are people living in poverty and others working in corporate America – we know people aren’t lazy and others are just lucky; we are those with GEDs worshipping with those who have advanced degrees; we are diverse ages and languages. Look at the beautiful rainbow. I wish you could see what I get to see every week when I stand here. You are beautiful. And we are blessed. We bless one another with such honesty and vulnerability. When we share our personal experiences of escaping crack and hustling; when we tell each other what it’s like to live with mental illness and HIV; when we share what life was like during the Great Depression and what losing a job yesterday feels like, there is not much we can say causes us little concern. Many of us know what it feels like to be a social outcast – and those who didn’t before, know it now. We all know such pain is not trivial to the person experiencing it. Nor to their friends, and fellow worshippers, and nor to Jesus is it of little concern.

It was all connected for Dr. King. Injustice anywhere was injustice everywhere. When Mrs. King - whom we should honor this year too – when she called gay marriage a civil rights issue and denounced the proposed constitutional amendment, *she* was denounced and told her comments demeaned the work of the entire civil rights movement. Why bother with something so trivial, of such little consequence?

Because the dream is of so much more. The dream can’t be achieved by ourselves, focused on the details of our own limited perspective. The dream is of the beloved community. What’s more loving than standing with and for one another in our sadness, in our darkness, in our grief, in our fear, in the injustices directed toward any of my brothers and sisters, whose pain and burden is lifted by the disciples of Jesus who call it their own- Yes, for the beautiful disciples sitting right here, we share one another’s burdens and are blessed by the stories of one another’s concerns.