

Radical Hospitality
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“Radical Hospitality” Pilgrim Church UCC, January 17, 2016, (John 2:1-11) Second Sunday after Epiphany

Jesus and his mom are at a wedding close to their home in Nazareth. It’s probably for family friends, and there’s trouble at the celebration—the wine runs out. Mary turns to Jesus and states the obvious: “They have no wine.” We can imagine Jesus’ response as a bit annoyed: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not come.” He probably just wanted to be a normal wedding guest and enjoy the party. Though Mary, being the strong woman we know that she was, looks right past her son to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you.”^[1] Mary just dropped the gauntlet—you better do something about this wine situation, Jesus. And before you know it, Jesus has turned a whole lot of water into a whole lot of wine in his first of seven signs in the Gospel of John.

Let’s do the math for a second—there’s 6 stone water jars which hold 20-30 gallons. We’ll go with 25 gallons in each just to be safe and multiply that by 6— 150 gallons of water to begin with. A standard drink of wine is about 5 ounces. There’s 128 ounces in a gallon so this means that Jesus created 3,840 “standard” drinks of wine for the wedding guests. A UCC Clergy colleague did these calculations and shared them this week if you happen to not trust my mathematical abilities, which I totally understand because there’s no way I could figure that math out on my own!

It’s helpful to put this miracle into mathematical perspective to get what it’s about. There are many miracles in the Gospels that may or may not be literal events. Many of us may have more of a metaphorical interpretation when it comes to most Biblical miracles, and that’s completely okay. Though hopefully we can understand miracle stories as meaningful and beautiful whether they happened exactly as written or not.

The story of Jesus turning 150 gallons of water into 3,840 drinks of wine for wedding guests to keep the party going is an awesome miracle whether it literally happened or not. What’s the deeper point John’s trying to convey here? That Jesus’ life and teachings are about abundance, generosity, grace, and love. And in the beginning of his ministry, his own mother had to remind Jesus of this!

Here’s the thing—hospitality and honor were incredibly important in Jesus’ day. When this family ran out of wine at their wedding, it reflected badly on them. Their resources were on display and clearly their resources didn’t go far enough to be the hosts they wanted to be for their guests. Wine was a staple of the Middle Eastern diet. So running out of wine at a wedding was embarrassing and they probably began to feel like bad hosts which could easily lead to shame in their cultural context.

It was a common trick that you’d put the good wine out in the beginning. And when people had had a few glasses, you’d switch to the cheap stuff. Yet they ran out of wine completely. In this miracle, Jesus creates the best of the best wine, overflowing amounts of the best of the best wine, and the overflowing amounts of the best of the best wine is given once the celebration has been underway for a while. Folks would have been so surprised and exhilarated. No one more so than the family who was hosting this wedding. They weren’t embarrassed anymore and had no reason to be ashamed. In fact, this wedding may have gone down as one of the best around—because this family would have been viewed as

amazing hosts who took care of their guests in a way that made everyone feel honored. There was an abundance of generosity and the best stuff was served to honor those present as everyone celebrated.

We hear at the end of the passage that Jesus' disciples believed in him after seeing this first sign (or perhaps a better translation is that they trusted in him.) Why? Because with Mary's prodding, Jesus showed empathy for this family's situation of dishonor by providing a superabundance of good wine. That's what makes this a miracle—Jesus was profoundly there for a family who desired to be good hosts for everyone present. It's a story about radical hospitality.

Think about times in your life when someone was an excellent host. What made you feel welcomed? What made you feel appreciated, even loved as a guest? Hospitality is at the heart of the Christian faith. In the United Church of Christ, we are a church of radical hospitality—welcoming people into the heart of our Church who have sometimes been turned away elsewhere. We are rightly proud that we are a Church of Firsts.[2] New England Congregationalists were among the first Americans to take a stand against slavery. We were the first Protestant denomination to ordain an African American minister, a woman minister (since New Testament times), and an openly gay minister. And we were the first denomination to support same-gender marriage equality back in 2005. We in the UCC are proud that we're a Church of Firsts and we've put our necks out there to do what's right by extending radical hospitality.

But what does radical hospitality look like in 2016 and beyond? That's a deep purpose question we as a denomination and local churches in our denomination are increasingly asking ourselves. Have we gone far enough—do we need to go further? What are some of the next frontiers of radical hospitality and inclusion that we need to address? It strikes me that immigrants and Muslims who've lived in our country for many years or who are trying to come to our country may particularly have a thing or two to say about what hospitality looks and feels like these days.

We UCCers can't afford to pat ourselves on the back, claim that we're a Church of Firsts, and act like the work of radical hospitality is done. It's not. On Tuesday, President Obama delivered his final State of the Union address and his words about our treatment of Muslims in our country specifically are worth repeating. President Obama said, "When politicians insult Muslims, when a mosque is vandalized, or a kid bullied, that doesn't make us safer. That's not telling it like it is. It's just wrong. It diminishes us in the eyes of the world. It makes it harder to achieve our goals. And it betrays who we are as a country."[3]

Good, sincere interfaith work is becoming more important now than ever. We can show that we practice a different kind of Christianity in the UCC than people seem to assume is the norm for our religion. And we do that by owning who we are, what we believe, and how we walk the Way of Jesus and respecting how others are walking their spiritual paths. Brian McLaren (an Emergence Christianity theologian) argues for a Christian identity that's both strong and kind, and he's noted for his interfaith work with Muslims. McLaren wrote: "Since 2001, I've been convinced that Christian identity involves both witness—graciously and confidently sharing our unique, Christ-centered message, and with-ness, experiencing solidarity with people of other faiths, worshipping in one another's presence and working together for the common good."[4] McLaren argues that it is possible to have a Christian faith that combines key elements of more conservative 'new-line' Christianity (strength, commitment, and intensity of meaning) with key elements of more liberal 'old-line' Christianity (ecumenism, reasonableness, and a peaceable attitude).[5] This may very well be a deep purpose question about radical hospitality that we wrestle with in our time. How can Christians be strong in our identity and truly kind toward people of other faiths or no faith at all?

You know on this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, it's important to remember that Dr. King was noted for reaching across boundaries for the good of the Civil Rights movement. Dr. King was a strong Christian rooted in his Christian identity, a minister who was an accomplished preacher and popular theologian. And he extended himself outward—even visiting Gandhi in India who was obviously rooted in his Hinduism. There's iconic images of Dr. King linked arm in arm with a Greek Orthodox Archbishop and marching with rabbis, priests, and ministers across various denominations. His nonviolent protest struck a chord in the hearts of many Americans because folks could begin to see a common shared humanity no matter how segregated people had been. Dr. King is a model for how a Christian can be strong in their religious identity and kind toward people of other faiths or no faith at all. His example can help us as we move forward in these sometimes difficult times when we as people and local churches and our denomination are asking ourselves deep purpose questions.

And tomorrow—beginning at 9 AM at Grace Chapel—there will be a panel of speakers (Continuing the Conversation on Race) featuring our own Sylvia Ferrell-Jones. This important panel will be followed by a Unity Walk, a program of spoken word, poetry, and songs inside Cary Hall, and then service opportunities throughout our town. One of the service opportunities will be hosted by our church. Our Cradles to Crayons Pop-Up Giving Factory (organized by Lisa Boehm this time around) will be part of our town-wide celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. All are welcome to attend these observances of a man who was strong and kind and called us to be better for ourselves and for future generations. And let's never forget that we're also walking in the Way of Jesus—who promised to be with us and offers new life and God's abundant love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] John 2:1-5.

[2] "UCC 'Firsts'" http://www.ucc.org/about-us_old-firsts

[3] President Barack Obama, "State of the Union 2016," CNN, January 12, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/12/politics/state-of-the-union-2016-transcrip...>

[4] Brian D. McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohamed Cross the Road: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*, 242.

[5] *Ibid*, 38.