



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 20, 2019
ISAIAH 62:1-5; PSALM 36:5-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11; JOHN 2:1-11

ORDINARY TRANSFORMATION

JOHN 2:1-11 [*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.]*

The beloved poet Mary Oliver died on Thursday. She wrote:

*I don't know who God is exactly.
But I'll tell you this.
I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.
Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing under the water.
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me what they were saying.
Said the river I am part of holiness.
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.
Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.
You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.
You don't hear them at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears.
And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through all the traffic, the ambition.*

-Mary Oliver, *At the River Clarion*¹

The holiness of the moss, the river, the water. It is profound. The holiness of the ordinary things. Which includes you and me, if you don't mind me calling you ordinary.

But why was Jesus' first *miracle*, his debut album, his first pitch as a pro, so low-key, such a soft ball? Why was Jesus' first *miracle* so ...ordinary?

The gospel says of the water and the wine, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his *glory*; and his disciples believed in him."

Frankly, it doesn't seem that very exciting of a miracle, does it? Later, Jesus is going to raise Lazarus from the dead, for godssake. Why not start this ministry with a bang, like that? Does changing water into wine really "reveal his glory?"

I am imagining the scene. The people there. The servants who brought the water jugs that people wash their hands in to the steward for tasting – and he declares it superior wine. Were they saying to each other, "Wait, did that just happen?" Did they tell their friends the story the next day and have people say, "Aww, you must have mixed up the jugs! It's not a miracle."

Why such an ordinary thing, to be Jesus' first miracle?

So all week I've been chewing on ordinariness. In the gospel and Jesus' odd choice. In Mary Oliver's breathtaking poetry. In myself. In society. That it's actually the ordinary, daily life things that matter most to us. It's our living conditions, the water we drink, the people we are in relationship with, that we care about. I

don't go around praying that my beloved dead will be raised from their graves today like Lazarus, ohhh, as much as I would dearly love that. I do go around praying that people in need will have food and drink and safe passage, that my daughter will pass her test, that next week's event will turn out okay... for blessing in the ordinary things of life.

Because ordinary, in this sense, does not mean inconsequential. Ordinary is the air we breathe. And it is the ordinary things that contain the seeds of the miracles of our transformation. Like the river whispering to Mary Oliver – and her poetry then quickening the heart, the breath of millions, transforming our spirits closer to recognizing the holy right here.

In my eye: recognizing the ordinary holy – that is how miracles happen. Martin Luther King changed the world. That's a miracle. Not single-handedly, of course, and not **all** the way there, Lord knows – but he changed it. And not with extraordinary physical might. With nonviolence. With walking. With telling his dream to people. Ordinary things – the feet, the voice, a dream – containing the extraordinariness of the holy, helping people to recognize it and so transforming society to come closer to the Kingdom.

Now I'm not trying to make pablum out of the grittiness of his journey and what he endured. Fifty-six years ago he preached to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church:

"Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and not concerned about the city government that damns the soul, the

economic conditions that corrupt the soul, the slum conditions, the social evils that cripple the soul, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood."²

But Martin Luther King was a Baptist preacher – religion was not dry and dead to him. He preached Jesus, so he preached and prodded and revealed the holy, the dream, for our transformation. Transformation: it's what Martin Luther King was preaching and working for and risking for and dying for.

And on this eve of Martin Luther King Day, can we hear again how it's the structures of society that we live in, that become so ordinary to us we barely notice them, the ongoing social evils that seem so much a part of our ordinary American life that we breeze right through them – it's these that King raises up. In his time it was civil rights. In our time, well, it STILL is, and it still is the ongoing transformation we need as people of Christ's kingdom.

And that is the Gospel, isn't it? Transformation is what Jesus brings. Jesus took the ordinary, the water in the jugs, and gave them wine – Jesus takes what we HAVE and transforms it into what we NEED.

We know that soon he will be taking wine and transforming it into his blood. Taking again what we have and transforming it into what we need, he gives us everything *he* has, that we might be transformed in him.

And now, as followers of Jesus, as Christians, we are called to participate in that transformation, not in some single fireworks miracle, but in an ongoing living into the holy of the ordinary

around us, noticing it and loving it like the poet Mary Oliver who said, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."³ Like Martin Luther King, who said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."⁴

The ordinary, everyday things of the world *are* our things that matter, our holy things, the things that Jesus used for his first miracle. The Gospel of John doesn't even call Jesus' acts "miracles," but rather, "signs." "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee." That choice of words by the writer of John's Gospel was not random; it is highly significant. Because signs **point us** somewhere.

Jesus gives us this sign, pointing us to how he is here to take what we have and transform it into what we need. Water into wine at Cana. Wine into his blood, a sign at the Last Supper, a reality at the crucifixion. Giving himself fully for our transformation.

So we come to this altar today, and in the transformation of bread and wine to his body and blood, we participate in the life of the resurrected Christ. Jesus taking what we have – ourselves and our simple gifts – and giving us what we need: the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

Can we recognize the holiness in our ordinary hands and be transformed. The poet coaxes us to see the holy in the ordinary life around us and be moved to go deeper. The activist, the prophet, calls out the ordinary structures that distort what should be holy: our life together – and exhorts us to not be silent.

Jesus, is there in the midst of all of it, changing water to wine as a sign that we, too, can be transformed. He is here giving us what we need in our lives, and at this table. Use it to be transformed.

Again, Mary Oliver:

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.
They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward
to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.
They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.
I want
to see Jesus,
maybe in the clouds

or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man
and clearly
someone else
besides.
On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.
Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.

—Mary Oliver, *The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist*⁵

Transformation. Not such a minor first miracle after all.

¹ Oliver, Mary. "At the River Clarion." *Evidence*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2009. p. 51.

² King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Can A Christian Be a Communist?" Sermon Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church. September 30, 1962. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/can-christian-be-communist-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church>. (retrieved January 18, 2019).

³ Oliver, Mary. "Sometimes." *Red Bird*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2008. p. 37.

⁴ King, Martin Luther, Jr. "A Speech on Courage – Selma, Alabama." March 8, 1965. <http://www.sourcedquotes.com/Martin-Luther-King-Jr.-quote-on-courage-a-man-dies>. (retrieved January 18, 2019).

⁵ Oliver, Mary. "The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist." *Thirst*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2006. p. 24.

