Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.

Epiphany II
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Jesus goes to a wedding in Cana of Galilee with his mother Mary and friends. There at the wedding, he turns water into wine. Traditional Jewish weddings were communal affairs and lasted for seven days. The festivities involved a joyful procession of the bride and her family to the groom's house. Weddings were occasions for intense community celebration and so it wasn't surprising that they run out of wine. What was surprising was the sudden burden of responsibility that Mary shifted on to Jesus. If Jesus was looking toward the crucifixion and resurrection as moments of his glorification, Mary co-opted him into assuming a responsibility that revealed him as the one who had power to fill our emptiness and turn us into a people fit for purpose.

Fill the jars with water! He said. And they filled them up to the brim. Now, draw some out and take it to the chief steward. "Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after guest have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" The steward complained bitterly to the bridegroom. Sometimes I feel like we are the empty jars waiting to be filled with life giving water that can be turned into wine. Sometimes I tend to think that Dr. King is one of those servants whom Jesus asked to fill the jars with water.

Today we celebrate an icon of American consciousness-the servant who like the servants in the story simply obeyed Jesus' directions, poured water into empty jars and drew some for the steward to drink. Just like the steward, Dr. King gave us some of the new wine, when we all drank, we realized that it was a new kind of wine which fills all with a sense of a pride as members of a community, a new kind of wine which unite us around a love that fills a wedding banquet, a new kind of wine which everyone can drink with the knowledge that all have been equally invited to God's wedding banquet.

Dr. King was keenly aware that the American Experiment was never about color-because the men who wrote these words, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal*" did not believe in the legacy of ancestry. More than that, he knew that the words of the American experiment was rooted in the belief that God created us equal. For this reason he couldn't stay silent in the midst of the deafening cries of his African American brothers and sisters across the country who were being debased because of the color of their skin.

Dr. King took inspiration from the prophet Isaiah who saw the ruin of Jerusalem and the depression among the exile community, and declined to stay silent. How could he stay silent in the face of racism, poverty, redlining and Jim Crow? How can you be silent when African Americans couldn't to a restaurant or hotel of their own choosing, sit on any available seat on a bus nor drink from the same water fountain? How can you stay silent when your very personhood is under question? How do you explain such a dynamic to a child?

Dr. King knew at his core that there was something terribly wrong with how this society was moving away from the sound Judeo-Christian heritage that all are created in the image of God and all of us are inheritors of a legacy of dignity and worth. He knew that the dehumanizing of African Americans wasn't the promise of America nor was it of God. He knew that the divine image of God in each of us demanded a different outcome.

The problem he faced was that this being that God created had been distorted by the over identification with false narratives of superiority, and so the purity, power and beauty of who we truly are was lost among the layers of the false self-the false self that convinces itself that its dignity is dependent on the diminished dignity of another person of a different race or ethnicity.

If we are the empty jars, then for Dr. King to fill the empty jars with water would mean deconstructing that false self, unmasking that fabricated self and unleashing that positive being within everyone so that each of us, empty jars that we are can be fit for purpose, we can be filled with water that can be turned into wine-wine that tastes good because it is different, wine that tastes good because it is rich, wine that tastes good because its fulfilling. More to the point, by virtue of the gift of the new wine that we have become, we will be fit for purpose, we will not only be on a journey towards spiritual wholeness, but we will thrive because our communities will thrive.

Remember, any spiritual journey first begins with the acknowledgment that we are divinely created for community. And communities thrive when they embrace everyone, when each member is welcomed, affirmed and belongs. It is not enough to welcome another into a community, but it is more than enough to create a sense of belonging to those we welcome into our communities.

A community that embraces all of God's children, also recognizes that each is different and each has a gift fit for purpose. They acknowledge that there's no one person within the community who doesn't have a gift. St. Paul addresses the confused congregation in Corinth-there are diversity of spiritual gifts, each of us has been given one or another. The joy in manifesting the gift that you have is not necessarily for your own good or benefit, rather, it is for the good of all and for the benefit of the beloved community.

The interest of the community places a limit on any desire of one individual to selfishly appropriate the gift that he or she has been freely given for his or her own individual benefit, and it further subjects the individual interest to that of the community. Paul's idea is totally antithetical to what we have come to know about ourselves and our culture which worships the supremacy of the individual. If a community can thrive, it can only do so because people who are fit for purpose, people like you and me are willing to uphold the values that offer deeper meaning to every member of the community.

Think about it this way, the water that was turned into wine was not meant for only one person or some people within the community, it was meant for all the members of the community that had gathered for the wedding. And if we agree that each member of that community had access to the new wine, then we too cannot stay silent if members of our community do not have access to the new wine or if members of our community are denigrated. We cannot stay silent if members of our community are discriminated against, we cannot stay silent if members of our community are dealing with poverty, poor schools or unsafe neighborhoods. We cannot stay silent if members of our community are being denied the opportunity to drink of the new communal wine. Like Dr. King and prophets like Isaiah, we have to speak hope to the distressed members of our community and continue to make sure that they too can drink of the new wine.

There's a cliché that states ***"each one for himself and God for us all."*** This is as much a fallacy as it is destructive to any social cohesion. Dr. King was aware that each cannot be for themselves, each cannot be a master unto themselves, each was not an island unto themselves, none of us is a silo. That is why he makes the claim that "*we must learn to live together as brothers (sisters) or perish together as fools."*

The question this morning is, how can God be for all of us when you are for yourself? The God who is for all of us requires of me to see His very self in you. So I cannot be for myself and hope that God will be for us all when the duty that I owe you is to see God in you. This is the danger, that we become so full of ourselves that there is no space left to fill us with that life-giving water and so we are unable to acknowledge that very self of God in the other. That is the moment that we declare that we cannot be in a community with the other, that is the moment when we can discriminate against the other. That is the moment when we can perpetrate all kinds of evil against the other-and to justify it. But to see God in you is to acknowledge that I can be in a community with you.

For the millions of people-both Blacks and Whites who walked with Dr. King, they tasted the new wine and so knew that like the steward, they could complain. The new was better than the old and so they embraced the new because they could tell the difference. They believed in what Ambrose of Milan once said ***"No one heals himself by wounding another."*** And so in the face of adversity they soldiered on, we too must soldier on, not with violence but with the deep abiding faith that the new wine is worth fighting for because it is fit for purpose. The new wine is worth dying for because it is fit for purpose. Our taste of the new wine is the only way we can transform our communities-and make them fit for purpose, fit to live in. Amen.