

“Remembering Promises, Renewing Vows” – MLK Sunday, 2016 (John 2:1-11)
Ned Allyn Parker

“Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, forget you; Shadowed beneath your hand, may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land...” We sing songs of commitment this morning. We’re a people of commitment. We must be if we’re here and not in front of a playoff game right now.

Our scripture is a passage about commitment. The author of the Gospel of John tries to tell us how important this story is by beginning the passage with, “On the third day...” It’s a tool used to pique our interest – befitting a miraculous sign. It calls our attention to the wondrous thing about to unfold in Cana. “On the third day” should call us *into* the text. Baptists are an Easter people, and that phrase “On the third day” should mean something to us. “On the third day” foreshadows an end that eventually becomes a beginning... “on the third day.”

Even in the first four words of the story, whatever is to come: we should recognize it will be critical to how the rest of the gospel unfolds.

Jesus has been gathering disciples in Galilee and they join him for the wedding of a friend in Cana. Cana is a small village about nine miles northeast of Nazareth – about a half a day’s walk from Jesus’ hometown. His mother, Mary, is with him, too. In fact, she is the one who instigates the scenario that unfolds.

We insinuate that Mary knows there’s something special about her son. She’s his mom; she must have a deeper understanding of the depth and breadth of his inner-spirit, of the tremendous potential lying deep within him. She says to him, “They have run out of wine.” It’s clear she’s expecting him to do something – and eventually he does do something. It is something worthy of a first miracle, something that indicates the manner of individual present

before her, and present with us each time we gather here, in his name. He comes to the aid of friends in a bind – he is committed to his friendships.

If we pause for perspective and we discern the undercurrents – the nature – of this story, perhaps we'll recognize John's passage is a narrative of commitment.

In the verses leading up to this one we have Andrew, Simon-Peter, Phillip, and Nathaniel – the disciple who asked if anything good could come out of Nazareth – all beginning their journey of commitment with the one who would become their Rabbi.

We have Mary, the mother of Jesus, clearly committed to the work she knows her son is capable of. She tells the steward: "Do whatever it is he says."

We have servants and a steward committed to the success of this wedding, because they follow Mary's instructions, and they listen to Jesus. Perhaps they're just a little anxious because it was their responsibility to share the wedding wine more judiciously.

The story ends by reinforcing the disciples' commitment, which is solidified when they witness the stunning sign that unfolds before them. The story says, "They believed in him."

And of course, the final evidence that suggests this is a story about commitment is that the backdrop for this formidable scene is a wedding ceremony. Two people committing themselves to each other becomes the sacred setting.

Commitment.

When I visited Israel a year ago, I was able to visit the church, which stands on the location where tradition tells us this wedding took place. Tradition says Jesus stood in that very spot and – because he was a committed friend, and a committed son, and committed to the work he knew awaited him – he offered this significant sign as a *gesture* of his *own* commitment, and a *blessing* of his *friends'* commitment in marriage, and a *recognition* of the commitment we *all*

experience on this journey with God. It is about all of these, I believe – not only his ministry. Because his initial response to his mother is a firm “No.” He says to her, “My hour is not yet come.” So we must stand back and unfix our gaze from the smaller details and see the panoramic vision of this man’s heart. He says it isn’t yet time, but eventually his final response is a breathtaking gesture. Perhaps he is moved by his own commitment to family, and by this image of friends committing themselves to one another.

Commitment.

When I entered that church in Cana, I happened upon a large group of pilgrims surrounding their two friends who gazed lovingly into each other’s eyes as they renewed their vows in that sacred spot – recommitting themselves in their own relationship. Their friends and family stood around them, holding hands in a big circle. As the couple finished their vows, the people in the circle began to sing, and the two wrapped their arms around each other in a deep embrace.

Though the song they sang was in Japanese, we knew it by the English words:

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity may one day be restored,
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, and they’ll know we are
Christians by our love...*

Commitment and re-commitment.

We remember the story about the wedding in Cana today, this day that we also remember and celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was, if nothing else, committed to a righteous cause – committed to a hallowed dream. A dream of justice.

Today as we consider commitment, perhaps we are compelled to deepen our own commitment by formally recommitting ourselves to this cause of social justice. Yes, we are a

historic peace church. Yes, this church is part of a regional association of Baptists committed to racial justice, which formed as a reaction to another commitment – the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church *and* in the pulpit. Yes, as part of this regional association, we are part of a denomination; whose present form took shape as a response to a different kind of Baptist group that was still justifying slavery with its sacred text – our Bible. Yes, as part of this denomination, we are part of a much larger group of Christians who formed based on the teachings of a rabbi who committed his very life to the pursuit of economic justice, moral excellence, spiritual wholeness, and a whole lot of love for his fellow humanity.

Yes, all of these things are true.

But it sure is good to remind ourselves of that once in a while, lest we are lulled into the security of this sanctuary and develop a social amnesia about the world that unfolds in frightening ways just outside those narthex doors. Dr. King's letter written in the Birmingham jail was an undertaking instigated by letters written by white pastors and clergy leaders asking that the boycotts and protests in Birmingham be halted. Today we learn from a recent Pew Research poll that over 70% of African American Christians believe police target African Americans, leading to harassment and in some cases death. Almost the exact opposite is true for white mainline Protestants – about 70% of who believe these are *only* random incidents.

We have *reason* to recommit ourselves. It is a matter of life and death.

Inspired by stories of commitment, we remind one another to take time to recommit to the good work of the Good News as we experience it in the lived-out narrative of the gospel message in this community – with all of its history, all of its love, all of its work, all of its music, all of its impact, all of its rootedness, all of its commitments.

And yet, remembering and recommitting ourselves to our faith and to the work to which this faith compels us isn't just something we do in words. It's something we live – recommitment to loving our neighbors is a way we live at the very core of who we are. This is what incarnational theology looks like. It's not just a matter of talking about it; it's a matter of living it. We don't just talk about building the beloved community; we pick up the hammers of justice, and the wrenches of love and labor over it, and we build it with our sweat and tears – and sometimes there are a lot of tears. Too many tears – so many we're baptized in them, immersed in the sorrow that *though* so much has been accomplished, there is yet so much more to do.

We talk a lot about this work at Seattle First Baptist. We talk a lot about commitment.

Remember incarnational theology isn't just about what we *choose to talk about*.

Incarnational theology is about who we are and how we act. It's not just about the relationships we describe in words; it's about the relationships we nurture and uphold.

Tomorrow evening we have an opportunity to be together in worship with our sister and brother churches of the Evergreen association. We have an opportunity to be together in a way that transcends the ethnic caucuses - the Euro, the Black, the Asian, the Hispanic caucuses we conduct our associational *business* with – we have an opportunity and a *deeper call* to be together with them as a fuller representation of the body of Christ at work in the world. This is commitment. It is ours to act out; it is ours to live into.

||

To borrow a phrase from our friends at University Baptist Church: when you walked through these doors for the first time; you may not have found what you were expecting, but I bet you found what you were looking for. In that discovery, you decided to come back again. And in that return, perhaps you found a deep sense of belonging. And in that belonging, perhaps

you decided to join this community and to formalize your relationship by becoming a member. That's *your* sacred commitment.

Some of you are here for the second or third time; some of you perhaps even happened upon us for the very first time today. All of you become part of this ongoing narrative of commitment and justice by investing your time in this hour of worship with us. And we welcome you with open arms. That's *our* sacred commitment.

In these inclusive experiences, we recognize, and live into the network of mutuality that is indeed *inescapable*. We are tied together – one to another. And in that interwoven connection recognize we are one body with many parts, celebrating our diversity with the great joyfulness worthy of a wedding feast...

...Where commitment was the theme for the party...

...And all who were present received abundantly...

May we find – through our own commitment – that this continues to be so.