

OUR ENDLESS & PROPER WORK

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“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” 1 Corinthians 12:7

Before coming to Grace Church, I spent many years working in Park Slope, Brooklyn, both as a babysitter and at a church there. Allow me to share with you what I think is the best and most Park Slope story I ever experienced:

A good friend was a fifth grade teacher at the local public elementary school, and was teaching a unit on poetry. One of his students wrote a poem about a burning bush. My friend asked her, “How did you choose this imagery, of a burning bush?”

“Ummm, I dunno,” she replied.

“Well, I have heard of a burning bush before,” he said. “Do you know who Moses is?”

“Ummmm, I don’t think so. Who is he?”

“Well,” my friend replied, “do you know what a prophet is?”

“Ummmm, I know what a *non-profit* is ...”

It’s so good and just so Park Slope. “I know what a non-profit is.” But I think it has a bigger message as well, if we point the question to ourselves: do you know what a prophet is? And if you do know, technically, by definition, what a prophet is, do you always recognize the prophets who are at work today? Or, maybe even more importantly, are you in touch with your own prophetic power? Your own prophetic potential?

It is a great question, specifically, for today, on the eve of our national holiday celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr., surely a modern prophet, a Christian preacher, a Gospel- and Jesus-follower, who pronounced the word of God to the people in his time, in his place, and at great risk and cost to his own personhood.

You know he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” But do you remember he went on to say: “I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” (To me, that part of the speech is so powerful in its specificity.)

You know he practiced non-violence, inspired--across religious and ethnic barriers--by Mahatma Gandhi, and said the inspiring aphorism: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” But did you know he also had critical words, even for the very institution out of which he came, the church?

In 1967, he said: “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.” (Have you ever heard people say that we must not preach politics in church? And yet here was Martin, a preacher, demanding this critical engagement between theology and power.)

And did you know Martin Luther King’s quest for racial justice was matched in fervor by his belief in economic justice, and not just at the end of his life, as some claim, but throughout his public career? In

1961, he said, “As long as there is poverty in this world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a billion dollars.” His wife, Coretta Scott King, remembers in her memoirs his constant wrestling with this issue, not wanting even to have enough money for his family to buy a house, because he didn’t feel they deserved it when so many people did not have enough money to live. Imagine the power necessary to tell someone who is objectively very rich, that they are not really so.

What makes someone a prophet? St. Paul tackles this in his letter to the Corinthians: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy. To be a prophet, like all of these gifts, is to work for the common good. It is to have the courage to speak the truth, the truth that is always grounded in God’s *love* for us, above all--for each and every one of us--in the face of corrupt and specific evil at work in the world. To be a critic of politicians, of churches, and of economies that are preying on specific groups of people in desperate attempts to hold on to power.

Okay, I’m sure you have heard the phrase “preaching to the choir,” right? I have always loved this phrase, as a former chorister, because it assumes a kind of faithful perfection in those of us who are all here today. Oh yes, if you got out of bed this morning, you’re in the choir, and I’m preaching to you. In fact, I’m sure a lot of you in the pews today are thinking, what is this white lady doing up there telling me what I already know about Martin Luther King, Jr? What could she possibly have to add?

But there is something kind of hidden in today’s Gospel passage, something that is about who Jesus is preaching to, that I wonder if you noticed, so I will go through it now:

The story this morning is also known as Jesus’ first sign, his first miraculous act, of seven such signs in the Gospel of John. He is at a wedding in Cana, with his mother, and also his friends. The wine runs out, something that at the time would have been even worse than a similar occurrence at a modern wedding--because wine was what people drank; it was the safest liquid for consumption, and water could have any number of things lurking in it that made people quite ill. So this would be like if a wedding ran out of all liquid. And this lack of wine at the wedding was also a social problem, not merely a problem of poor hospitality on the part of the bride and groom. The way weddings worked, they were more like a pot-luck. No one family could provide all the food and drink for a whole gathering this large, so people brought their own provisions to share. So this lack of wine was really the fault of the guests.

Mary is in a tizzy, and in a very motherly way, reports to Jesus, “I’m just saying They have no wine left.” At which point, Jesus rebuffs her. “Ok, why is that my problem, Mom, I’m trying to enjoy the party.”

And this is where the story gets interesting: Mary turns to the servants and tells them to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. Presumably Jesus now has now decided to just go along with his mother’s coaxing, and directs them to fill their empty jars with water, and take them to the steward, kind of like the head caterer of the night. Then there is this parenthetical in the text that reminds us that the servants of the house are in on it; they are the only ones who know what Jesus is up to. The wine is the best wine the steward has ever tasted. And then we learn that this is the first of his signs, that it reveals his glory, and that it makes his disciples, that is, his friends and peers, believe.

Why does this Gospel make such a point of letting us know two things: 1) That Mary coaxes this action out of Jesus and 2) that the servants are the ones who Jesus lets in on what’s going on?

I think there are a few key answers that we learn from this being Jesus’ first sign, and it’s not just the common take away that Jesus liked a good party and abundance is important, blah blah blah. Though I’m sure Jesus did like a good party, he also *insists* on communities taking care of each other. Making sure there was enough wine was not a passive aggressive rebuke to the hosts, but a sign for the people: give of yourself, share your wealth, your belongings, your wine. He also insists on this message going first to the servants, the lowliest among the party are elevated in importance and place. And finally, even Jesus needs to be carefully taught by his parents, coaxed into doing the right thing by those who love and form him, by Mary, his mother.

We need this message today, friends. We need this good word. Because though I may be preaching to the choir this morning here in Grace Church, the world out there is no choir. It can feel that we are at an impasse, with a government that is shutdown, intent and unmoving. It feels like we are approaching the bottom of our bottles. Who among you will be Mary, and coax what is right into being?

The poet Mary Oliver, who died this past week, has a poem called “Yes! No!” (a very Anglican title, I think) in which she concludes: “To pay attention, this is our endless/ and proper work.” I have been tossing it around all week, as news stories glide by me: people marching, for women, for indigenous peoples, and yet I am caught in my own myopia; I have to write a sermon, I have to send an email, on and on. “Why is that my problem, Mom, God, world??” To pay attention does feel endless.

It reminds me of the day I spent just outside of New Orleans a few years ago, visiting two museums in one day, only a few miles apart. The first was a plantation museum, a restored estate from the 1840s, a huge house and large open fields, and people in period costume showing us around, explaining all the fine things and going into detail about who each person was who lived there.

As the guide took us around the estate, and showed us the fields where the sugar cane was harvested, we stopped by the slave quarters, small huts with a door and a couple windows. My group ducked in to one, and as we did, a man touring with us exclaimed, “Well, this isn’t so bad, is it? Almost bigger than my apartment!” What does one say in that moment, a group of white people all together, standing on this holy and scarred ground? What would be the prophetic thing to say? I admit to you, I did not say it. I hid my face in embarrassment.

Later that day, we went to a second museum, The Whitney Plantation, the first museum in this country dedicated to remembering and discussing slavery, which by the way, opened in 2015. This museum was funded by a white man named John Cummings, who made a lot of money in real estate law, and decided to put a lot of it into this project that he couldn’t believe hadn’t yet happened. To the *New York Times*, around the time of the opening, answering why he decided to do this, he said: “I started to see slavery and the hangover from slavery everywhere I looked.” As a descendant of Irish laborers, he has no direct ties to slaveholders; still, in a departure from the views held by many Southern whites, Cummings considered the issue a personal one.

“If ‘guilt’ is the best word to use, then yes, I feel guilt,” he said. “I mean, you start understanding that the wealth of this part of the world — wealth that has benefited me — was created by some half a million black people who just passed us by. How is it that we don’t acknowledge this?”

To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work. This is the kind of thing that I wish I had been taught in school (and I was in 5th grade in 1996): that guilt is not a simple concept, that life is not always fair, and that we must take care of each other.

I think that young people, in particular, have an innate sense of our interconnectedness, of God’s love for us and for the world. It is why fifth graders with no religious education somehow still know the evocative power of a burning bush. But without a Mary in our lives, leading us in the right direction, we may lose touch with our prophetic potential. As we grow and are taught, the prophet becomes a non-profit, the jars stay filled with murky water, the servants stay in their small quarters, the governors stay racist, the walls go up, literal and metaphorical.

I urge you, today, as we remember the witness of our brother in Christ, Martin Luther King, Jr., to lift your heads, to pay attention, to lift your voices and sing, to sing out a prophecy to the people who need to hear it most, the people *out there*, the ones with no wine. This is our endless and proper work. Amen.