

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

We've gone green. And you know the liturgical calendar was WAY ahead of the trends on this one! Yes, we have entered into a season that our church calls "ordinary time," where we are to be about the work of the church. And I like that word, "work." I prefer "work" to the word "ministry," which tends to be loaded with lots of "special cargo." "Ministry" tends to be thought of as the purview of just a select few. I spoke with a man not long ago who told me he was between "ministries." He had been a Baptist college campus pastor south of Atlanta, but had lost that job. He then taught GED to prison convicts ("That was kind of a ministry..." he said, "At least it was with prisoners..."). But now he is "just teaching GED" to regular folks "until God gives me a ministry." Do you hear it? "Ministry" is a loaded word. Now we all know about work. No doubt about that word.

We are now in that liturgical season where we "do whatever Jesus tells [us]." And we do this work in the peculiar slant of light that Epiphany yields. The work Christ calls us into has much to do with the work that he performed. And we heard a little something about that work in this morning's gospel reading. This of course is the well-known first miracle of Jesus, where he transforms water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. In terms of John's gospel this work has much to do with establishing Jesus' identity as a performer of signs. Through this and six other signs John establishes Jesus' relationship with God, and that his power is the power of God incarnate, a power that "does" – that acts upon this world. Now this episode at the wedding is related to last Sunday's gospel, which also was very much about establishing Jesus' identity. There, we heard of Christ's baptism by John in the Jordan and the voice of God identifying Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved." When we read these stories in sequence – as is the intention of our lectionary – we find a movement from the identity of Jesus at his very core – "the Beloved" – to the living and acting out of that identity in transforming his world around him. The seven signs in John's gospel – e.g., the healing of the man born blind, the feeding of the five thousand, the restoring of Lazarus to life – are all about the transforming power of God's love. The move is from "Beloved" to living out of Belovedness.

Even within this passage about Jesus at the wedding feast we have a sense of this movement. Raymond Brown, the New Testament scholar, notes that John's gospel omits both a first-hand account of the baptism of Jesus as well as a narrative of the last supper. Instead Brown suggests that the author of John crunched up these two events like saltine crackers, and sprinkled them throughout the gospel. And indeed images of Eucharist and baptism appear over and over again throughout this gospel. And I find it interesting that both images of water and wine appear side by side in the relating of this story in Cana. And I find it fascinating that the baptismal image of water becomes the Eucharistic image of wine.

Thomas Merton notes that "the purpose of the sacraments is to transform us into those same sacraments." We are to become baptism. We are to live out Eucharist. To become baptism is to claim our own belovedness. Baptism is not just water on your head. And it is not just immersing yourself to be cleansed. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we lay claim to a relationship with God defined by love. In our baptism we claim our identity as "beloved of God."

But our baptism – our identity as beloved – is not an end in itself. Our identity is to be lived out as surely as water is turned into wine. And so from that place of belovedness we become Eucharist. Think about the four acts that occur in our Eucharistic prayer we pray each week: Jesus took the bread, he blessed it, he broke it, and he gave it. And he said: this is me taken in my incarnation, blessed in my baptism, broken in my crucifixion, and shared with the world in my resurrection to feed and nourish and give everlasting life. If our baptism establishes

our identity as beloved children of God, then the work of our lives is accepting that identity (this can take a while...) and then living out of that identity as a living sacrament – taken, blessed, broken, and shared. “You are my beloved” to “Do whatever he tells you.”

Now the ways this movement manifests itself are as varied as there are people making the move. And I would like to relate one such a movement experienced by a man we celebrate this weekend. This comes from David Garrow’s wonderful biography of Martin Luther King called *Bearing the Cross*. The year is 1956, and King – in very short time – has become the pastor of a small church in Montgomery, AL. And because an African-American woman refused to give up her seat on a bus, King found himself not only immersed in a civil rights movement in Montgomery, but the new voice of that movement nationally. Then the threats began, and King began to falter. I’ll let David Garrow tell us the rest (this is pretty lengthy, so settle in...)

(p56) Finally, on Friday night, January 27, the evening after his brief sojourn at the Montgomery jail, King’s crisis of confidence peaked. He returned home late after an MIA meeting. Coretta was asleep, and he was about to retire when the phone rang and yet another caller warned him that if he was going to leave Montgomery alive he had better do so soon. King hung up and went to bed, but found himself unable to sleep. Restless and fearful, he went to the kitchen, made some coffee, and sat down at the table. “I started thinking about many things,” he recalled eleven years later. He thought about the difficulties the MIA was facing, and the many threats he was receiving. “I was ready to give up,” he said later. “With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward,” to surrender the leadership to someone else. He thought about his life up until that moment. “The first twenty-five years of my life were very comfortable years, (p57) very happy years.” King later said, reflecting back on that moment in the most remarkable and self-revealing utterance he ever made publicly

I didn’t have to worry about anything. I have a marvelous mother and father. They went out of their way to provide everything for their children... I went right on through school; I never had to drop out to work or anything. And you know, I was about to conclude that life had been wrapped up for me in a Christmas package.

Now of course I was religious. I grew up in the church. I’m the son of a preacher... my grandfather was a preacher, my great grandfather was a preacher, my only brother is a preacher, my daddy’s brother is a preacher, so I didn’t have much choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church and the church meant something very real to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must, and have it, if you’re going to walk the lonely paths of this life.

That night, for the first time in his life, King felt such an experience as he sought to escape the pressures the MIA presidency had placed upon him. He thought more about how trouble-free his life had been until the movement began.

Everything was done for me, and if I had a problem I could always call Daddy – my earthly father. Things were solved. But one day after finishing school I was called to a little church, down in Montgomery, Alabama. And I started preaching there. Things were going well in that church, it was a marvelous experience. But one day a year later, a lady by the name of Rosa Parks decided that she wasn’t going to take it any longer... It was the beginning of a movement, and the people of Montgomery asked me to serve them as a spokesman, and as the president of

the new organization... that came into being to lead the boycott. I couldn't say no."

And then we started our struggle together. Things were going well for the first few days, but then, about ten or fifteen days later, after the white people in Montgomery knew that we meant business, they started doing some nasty things. They started making nasty telephone calls, and it came to the point that some days more than forty telephone calls would come in, threatening my life, the life of my family, the life of my child. I took it for a while, in a strong manner.

But that night, unable to be a peace with himself, King feared he could take it no longer. It was the most important night of his life, the one he always would think back to in future years when the pressures again seemed to be too great.

"It was around midnight," he said, thinking back on it. "You can have some strange experiences at midnight." The threatening caller had rattled him deeply. "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days we're going to blow your brains out, (p58) and blow up your house."

I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born.... She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute.

And I started thinking about a dedicated and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." ... I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised to never leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me.

Do you hear it? The movement from "You are my beloved," to "Do whatever he tells you." King's fear subsided, and three days later his house was bombed with Coretta and two month old Yolanda inside. They miraculously escaped injury. And when an angry mob gathered outside of his ravaged home, ready to go to battle that night, intent on bombing and burning white homes and families, King said: "We cannot advocate violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them." One hour

earlier their enemies tried to kill his wife and daughter! Love our enemies. Be good to them. Let them know you love them. Water into wine.

Here is the work of this season after the Epiphany, the work in the peculiar light of Christ. We may say, “Hey, I cannot be Martin Luther King...” nor should you. You are Christ’s beloved in your own skin, living your own life. And you know, it may actually be harder for us to own our belovedness and to become Eucharist than it was for MLK. For him his way, “bearing the cross,” was very well defined, and he could see the cost of each step. For most of us the taking, the blessing, the breaking, the giving comes in the smaller acts of our lives, in our relationships with our family and coworkers and friends and complete strangers. It takes a particular intentionality for us. We face a world that needs our belovedness and longs to know its own, a world that will ask us – all taken and blessed – to be broken and shared. Our prayer over our coffee cup is perhaps less dramatic, but nonetheless real. And the voice of God is no less real for each of us as well. We are God’s beloved, with whom God is well pleased. We will do whatever Jesus tells us. We are never left alone. No never alone. No never alone.