

**THE FIRST MIRACLE; JOHN 2:1-11; JANUARY 17, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY;
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I have enlightening conversations with my barber, who is really a hair stylist – there is a difference of course – but that’s another matter. Gabe, my hair stylist, is a wealth of information – perhaps a trait common to the profession. He happens to be a life long student of music, movies and sit-coms, and he’s something of a foodie.

Last Thursday, Gabe was telling me about a documentary he watched recently on the famous debate in 1968 between Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley. It may have been the first point/counter point programming for television; little did they know in 1968 the Pandora’s Box of political punditry and protest that would open and spew forth in the years to come.

Gabe’s point, other than telling me how Vidal got under Buckley’s skin provoking him to make unsavory comments which gave Vidal the win, Gabe’s point was the high level of discourse and vocabulary the liberal and conservative icons employed. Compared to the political discourse we hear today, he said, it was vastly more nuanced and complex not to mention their vocabulary-big words we don’t hear in the media today.

Some of you in higher education have said writing and general knowledge skills have dropped; and while funding and support for science and technology has increased, the arts and humanities have been cutback or eliminated. Marketable, vocational skills have replaced classic education that taught people how to think.

David Brooks says our age is “beauty-poor and meaning-deprived.”ⁱ Growing illiteracy is entertaining on late night TV when people are asked about the Bible or American history; but it is cause for concern when we hear of the appeal of political candidates with simplistic answers for complex issues that are little more than sound bites aimed to rouse fear and anger.

As far back as Alexis de Tocqueville, reducing things to simplistic terms was a noticeable trend. He said there were, in his time, those who, “in the name of progress, seek to reduce man to a material being. They look for what is useful without concern for what is just; they seek science removed from faith and prosperity apart from virtue. They style themselves as champions of modern civilization.”ⁱⁱ

Maybe it all goes back to the Enlightenment when science in its rebellious adolescence rejected the legitimacy of subjective knowledge and experience.

The point I want to make is that it would be easy, in our modern secular age, even in a church, to dismiss the miracle at Cana simply because it is called a miracle; then there is the apparent non-point of it, unlike his other miracles when people were healed or fed; plus his brusque comment to his mother, and her strange instruction to the servants to do whatever he told them.

Given these ‘loose ends’ I want to avoid us falling either into the trap of explaining the miracle away by seeing it only as a story with symbolic meaning or the other trap of trying to explain something that is, 2000 years later to our 21st century eyes, inexplicable.

Maybe you're thinking that doesn't leave much room to find the redeeming value of this story. But I ask your patience and consideration.

If the miracle is not about symbols and can't be explained what is it about? The late Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, Chaplain of Harvard University says, "It is the *shortage* which provides the context for the manifestation of the wine. We used to say, Gomes said, the age of miracles was past. We perform modern miracles at Raytheon and General Motors. Miracles are ordered up on a daily and scientific basis at Mass. General Hospital and explained at M.I.T."ⁱⁱⁱ

But what Gomes suggests to his Harvard audience is that the miracle at Cana is a story about God's unexpected abundance in the midst of scarcity. For those early believers the world was increasingly limiting and narrow. They were being rejected and ejected from their homes and synagogues. The state was making life as a Christian harder to sustain. Jesus turning the water into wine takes place in the context of not having enough, of shortage, of life-threatening scarcity.

Which provides our connection to this ancient text. In a world that pretends to be fact-based, logic-driven and superstition-free, a world in which technology has given us so much, in a nation *that has* so much what could we possibly be lacking?

Dr. Gomes offers an answer; he says we have a shortage of what he calls the "vital elements of life," including our spirit; living without these vital elements is becoming a way of life in the US. Is it possible, he asks, that what we have is not what we need and our state of need begins with civility and branches in many related directions that include our mental and physical health and social and economic well-being?

Gomes claims we are in a very real sense a 'have not' nation. We might at least acknowledge, he says, that things aren't as they once were; not to play the game of "Ain't it awful' or sell the illusion that some golden age, which may have never existed, is now long past. But to find common ground with those for whom this story was first intended.

Maybe it is enough to say, as the President did last week, it's time to stop shooting ourselves in the foot, fix our politics and move into the future. But it is hard to imagine how that will happen without being honest about the shortage of those "vital elements of life" across the nation, in this community, perhaps in our own lives.

The miracle at Cana is about much more than the singular act of turning water into wine. It is a story that announces that God will be present through this Jesus to people in need; it is in our weakness and dependence, not our strength, that God can do wondrous things with and for us.

Who would have thought America is a needy nation? Or the Presbyterian Church a needy church? We were taught things of their nature get better and to every problem there is a solution, that prosperity with its accompanying technology is just around the corner; and to recite the mantra of bigger and better every year. Yet, to come of age is to confront one's needs, to come up short, to recognize we are lacking, if not technology and material things, then human connections.

Every miracle Jesus performed was in response to an acknowledged need or lack or scarcity. Transformation is the name of his enterprise and ministry. The Jesus of the Gospel of John is like the birthday candle you can't blow out. He keeps showing up, taking the initiative, confronting poverty and disease, despair and failure and transforms the people held back and paralyzed by fear.

He is the Source of Life itself, he finds himself surrounded by rigid religion, an atheist state and unjust social practices and conditions. The people clamor to touch him, to have him touch them, to be relieved of their lameness or disease or blindness; to be saved from death.

Unlike the Jesus of Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's Jesus appears to read people's minds, to be in two places at once and to be unencumbered by traditional expectations for who a messiah should be and what he should do. When Jesus arrives reality is exploded, cracked open: at the well where he meets a woman of ill-repute, at the pool of Bethsaida where a lame man waits for the waters to stir, and along the road where a leprous man shunned by the community calls out to him. Finally, he comes to his friend Lazarus' home, apparently too late after Lazarus has died, and Jesus calls the dead man to walk from his tomb. Miracles yes, not to prove or disprove, but to accept or not as God's relentless search for the lost, God's unconditional offer of new and abundant life.

This is the weekend on which we remember The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In many ways significant progress has been made in race relations and socio-economic equity but it seems the more forward momentum we gain – electing a black President for example – the more behind we realize we are – the wave of police shootings of unarmed, innocent black men and boys over the past year.

Or maybe you find yourself in some untenable circumstance of health or home or career. Perhaps your resources of spirit and resilience have ebbed and there's nothing left; you've come up short; you're in some rigid reality that offers no relief, no promise of changing or getting better.

What's a nation with ongoing racial injustice, what's a person with depleted personal resources of mind, body and spirit, what's a church in a society of growing anti-religious sentiment and secular rejection of mystery and wonder to do? John says there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee that ran out of wine. Jesus showed up and gave them more and better wine than they could imagined or hoped for.

If it's the word "miracle" that hangs you up, then try using the word "grace."

And then as you face a new week in a new year with the same old challenges and intractable worries or anxiety or problems, simply recite the words of the ancient liturgy, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Then prepare yourself for the intervention of God's abundance. Amen.

ⁱ David Brooks, "When Beauty Strikes," *NYT*, Saturday, 1/16/16, A27.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York: 2015) 75.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, January to March, 2016, 16.