

“A Question of Timing”

I Corinthians 12:4-11; John 2:1-11

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 20, 2019
Matt Matthews

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

John 2:1-11 ¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Yogi Berra, the famed catcher for the New York Yankees baseball team, said, "You don't have to swing hard to hit a homerun. If you got the timing, it'll go."

This is a sermon about listing for God's timing in our lives.

I begin with this timeline from our history:

- On April 3, 1963 the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights began a campaign of coordinated marches and sit-ins against racism and segregation in Birmingham. They had invited the Southern Christian Leadership Conference headquartered in Atlanta to come help the locals with this campaign. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Abernathy were among those who came to help.
- On April 10 a judge issued a blanket injunction against "parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing." Leaders of the campaign announced they would engage in nonviolent civil disobedience and violate this order.
- On April 12, King and others were arrested.

A newspaper was smuggled into the jail for King to read, and in it was a statement written by eight white Alabama clergymen, seven pastors or bishops of churches and denominations, including a Presbyterian, and a rabbi. The statement was entitled, "A Call for Unity." In this statement, the clergy took offense at King's

method of protest, of sit in and march. They said these protests, no matter how nonviolent were stirring hatred. They said the cause of equality was just and should be worked out by continued negotiations (which had continued to fail) and in the courts. These well-meaning white clergy said the protest campaign was "unwise and *untimely*."

King began writing on the margins of that newspaper. King's 6,927 word response to these clergy became known as his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." In it he carefully addresses the clergymen's "Call for Unity." Kings writes about moral and immoral law.

He explained that he was not an outsider from Atlanta who didn't belong in Birmingham. Because racism was an American problem, it involved him and every American.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Dr. King explained how leaders of the protest campaign had hoped negotiations would yield results, but they had not. Segregation signs remained in place in downtown businesses. Talk had yielded talk but no action.

We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community . . .

Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

King lamented the white moderate in his letter. It was thoughtful, presumably faithful, people who wrote the Call for Unity. They represented the "white moderate." King lamented the white moderate "who constantly says,

"I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection . . .

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

And Dr. King addressed in painful detail the charge that the timing of this march was bad and that relations between the races would improve gradually over generations. Time won't heal racism, he wrote. People will. "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of [people] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation." He addressed the idea that civil rights could wait.

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

*Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored" . . . [1] when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—**then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.** (Emphasis mine.)*

Timing.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other brave souls helped stir a whole nation out of complacency and start working in more earnest and timely ways for justice for all. It wasn't pleasant and nobody was ready. But by God's grace, he and other saints were not willing to wait.

And, thank God, there are people in this generation who strive to wake us up to the injustices that still exist and to the pollution of the human heart that even good Christians try to cover up and fail to notice.

Timing.

Notice the conflict in our passage today between Jesus and his dear mother. Mary tells Jesus the wedding feast has run out of wine. She is implying that he should do something about it. His response is brusque: "Woman, what concern is that to you and me. My hour has not yet come."

This story from John functions on a highly symbolic level. Its beginning "On the third day" tips us off to think about this story in terms of Jesus's resurrection. The "hour" Jesus is talking about is the hour of his passion and salvific death. The wine in the text is Jesus' life-blood. The wedding is Holy Communion.

But there's a street level to this story, too. And on the street level of this story Jesus is saying that it's not time yet for him to start showing signs of his role as Messiah. Jesus is saying to Mary, "This can wait."

Mary, though, gives the motherly nudge. *This cannot wait. You are ready. This is your moment.* Mary looks to the servants and she tells them, simply, "Do whatever he says."

It's a line out of a Woody Allen film stereotype where a Jewish son can never ignore the love of a strong-willed Jewish mother. When mother and son face off, Mom always wins.

* * *

What is God nudging you to be and to do? How has God been encouraging you to stand up with somebody, for somebody? What injustice in this world has God given you to work on, to help, to heal? Where can your reach bring wholeness? How can you stand with those forgotten on the margins of our busy world? What word of grace can you speak? (*I'm too busy. I'm too old. I've already done my time. I'm not a good speaker. I lack experience.*) What word of grace can YOU speak?

What work of your hands is God calling you to share? What can your generosity of spirit do to bring peace on earth? Is God calling us off the sideline onto the playing field? Is God inviting our congregation to "Lift every voice and sing/Till earth and heaven ring/Ring with the harmonies of Liberty?"

What are we waiting for?

NOTES:

A "Call for Unity"

<https://www.whatsproudlywehail.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Group-of-Clergymen-Call-for-Unity.pdf?x65350>

King's response: The Letter from the Birmingham Jail.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/letter-birmingham-jail>