

Nothing Short of a Miracle, The Church of Gethsemane,
Sunday, January 18, 2004, Martin Luther King Sunday,
Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-12

It was nothing short of a miracle. No not the kind of miracle you see on television, no televangelists declaring a healing, making people walk who couldn't before. None of this kind of high drama. There was no hocus pocus, no Big Apple Circus magic tricks. This was his first miracle, amidst his family and friends. He was around those he loved and those who loved him, a receiver of hospitality. There was a simple problem, and a simple answer. The well had run dry—the people needed more wine. Mary encourages Jesus' gifts, letting him know the problem, implying the answer. The water jars are filled and between the time they were filled and the time the guests tasted it, wine it had become. The attention had not been brought to Jesus; he simply provided abundance out of a situation of scarcity, his first miracle according to the writer of John, was in view of hospitality, of family, of providing for the people of what they need.

Some days I think we need nothing short of a miracle to level the playing field in this country, to create a place where regardless of color and class we all have the same opportunities, where we would not feel the fear of scarcity but celebrate in God's abundance, in God providing wine of pleasure and joy for everyone. God's abundance in jobs and food and opportunities and education and generosity and love. How could we live differently knowing deep in our hearts that our God is an abundant God, not one who holds back because of the color of someone's skin or gender or class status or sexual orientation. How could we live differently as a country with this belief deeply ingrained in how we make policies and decisions, in how we interact with countries of people who speak other languages, who look differently than characters on prime time television? Some days I think we need a miracle to really stand up and say that we have reached the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. Some days I forget that God is one of abundance and has

give us all we need to reach that dream, we just haven't yet taken advantage of it.

You all know about the racial injustices of this world, some of you perhaps know far greater than I do, a white woman from the Midwest who has been relatively buffered. Sure, I went to a very diverse school; I was raised side by side with people of various religions and racial ethnic communities. But I was buffered because I have white skin privilege. I learned early on, not through explicit words or actions, but much more through implicit, under the surface, never vocalized feelings of supremacy, of feeling more confident than others because of the color of my skin and the cultural norms that I have been given.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in his presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference warns of the ways in which white folks internalize supremacy, just through the language we use every day of our lives. He says in his speech, "Where do we go from Here?"

"In Roget's Thesaurus there are 120 synonyms for blackness and at least sixty of them are offensive, as for example, blot, soot, grim, devil, and foul. And there are 134 synonyms for whiteness and all are favorable, expressed in such words as purity, cleanliness, chastity and innocence. A white lie is better than a black lie. The most degenerate member of a family is a "black sheep." Ossie David has suggested that maybe the English language should be reconstructed so that teachers will not be forced to teach the Negro child sixty ways to despise himself, and thereby perpetuate his false sense of inferiority, and the white child 134 ways to adore himself, and thereby perpetuate his false sense of superiority."

So, I may have been buffered but the learned the lie of supremacy, creating emotional and spiritual havoc in my life. As one of my favorite authors and activists, Mab Segrest, says, "the insanity of racism effects children deeply." As I grow older I get deeper in touch with how learning a lie of supremacy brings forward feelings of guilt, meekness, helplessness, confusion, anger. As I get deeper in

touch with that lie and I move through helplessness and towards action I must stand and say loud and clear that white supremacy, that racism and the systems and structures that support that are lies, are destructive to my spirit and soul, keeping me from living into a place of wholeness and integrity, a place that God intends for us all. It keeps me from attending God's great banquet. And the more I name that lie, the freer I feel, the closer I can come to knowing God's grace and love.

White people have often told me that racism no longer exists, we won the Civil Rights movement, that justice has come. I am sure that I have said this a few times in my life as well. We all know that this is simply not true. We live in Amadou Diallo's city, we experience the misdistribution of wealth and resources. We see how this is a result of racist and classist structures that have created our city and world for centuries now.

Racism is insidious; it creeps in and takes hold, dividing and conquering God's people from seeking fully God's grace and love. Through King's words we know how ingrained it is in the very language we use to communicate. You all know that racism still exists, I don't have to make this argument in this congregation, You have experienced how racism divides, in prisons, in your workplace, in your homes, in your families, in movements for social change. Mab reminds us "no movement or person in this country can escape the repression and dehumanization that was required for the genocide of Native peoples and the enslavement of Africans." King's dream of justice and societal structural change has not yet been achieved, but as we work to create his dream, as we work using the tools and gifts that God gives freely, as we confront our own history, take long hard looks at ourselves, as we work for social change, we must remember the times when we experience nothing short of a miracle.

This past weekend I was with the Church of the Servant-Savior in Houston, TX. I was there meeting with the Evangelists from the organization, "That All May Freely Serve," a group of us who travel spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, of his justice and love for the world, which

includes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks. The church was amazing, such a wonderful place of hospitality. I could see Jesus there changing the water into wine in the fellowship hall when the well had run dry, amidst his community who fought for justice, who loved every single person who came through their door.

Now, I had never been to Texas before. I didn't know what to think, I was on edge the whole weekend, aware of the history of domination in this state, aware of the Mexican-American War, aware of the injustices of immigration, aware of James Byrd, a young African-American man murdered by young white men too close to where we were staying. But then I remember how James Byrd's mother personally appealed to Governor Bush as they sought to not include sexual orientation in new hate crimes legislation. I remember how coalitions of outrage and solidarity are put into place. But still, I didn't feel completely comfortable, I must admit, feeling thousands of years of history on my back, weighing me down, raising those feelings of guilt and helplessness and silence.

The first night we were there and I met a young woman who was a member of the church. She helped as we all prepared the supper for the evening, the food was incredibly tasty. We sit down to eat with each other, convene at the table with one another, we bless the food, we talk, we catch up, we are just so happy to be with each other. And then I hear the story of this young woman who is just beginning college. She told her parents she was a lesbian and her parents completely lost it and attempted to kill their daughter because she was better off dead than a lesbian. This happened on a Wednesday night. The young woman found help in one of her friends, another young woman who happened to be a member of the church. She called her mom out of a prayer service and told her that there was an emergency, that they needed to talk. The young women came to the church and told them what had happened. This was a place of hospitality. There was enough love and attention to go around here. This was a place of miracle where Jesus turns water into wine and provides for the entire household of God. The church took this challenge

seriously. The young woman was taken into the church, she became a ward of the church, and the church became her parents. She lives with a family in the church and they have covenanted together to care for her and love her, regardless of who she is.

I am thankful for the example of the Servant-Savior Church, the community that creates a true oasis of hospitality where miracles can happen. They open their doors and invite all to the wedding banquet, sure that there still be enough of God's abundance for everyone who cares to join them.

Pauli Murray, a Black Activist, Lawyer, Feminist, Priest and Poet and longtime New Yorker was an extraordinary woman. Pauli should be a name we find on our coffee tables like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X or John Calvin for that matter. Pauli was organizing sit-ins and protests before King was even born; most likely, she laid the groundwork for generations of struggle that came after her. She struggled through life as the only female lawyer in her law school class at Howard University. She fought to desegregate schools with her very own body and learned that people were afraid as she was rejected time and time again. Raised Episcopalian, she was ordained late in her life as one of the first women in her denomination. She tore down wall after wall in her life as an independent Black woman, she experienced the miracle of water being turned into wine. Time and time again she did what no one else thought she could do. She had experienced deep pain, exclusion, rejection, hatred and anger throughout her life. She led a life of scraping by, following her dreams, and challenging the world and church to open its doors to become a household of hospitality. But she did so with continuous faith and joy and hope. She is part of the deep history and foundation we share together and her name is added as one of the prophets.

Pauli worked for women's ordination in the Episcopal Church. On the evening of the vote of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church to ordain women a priest friend called her and told her "I want you to invite you to celebrate your first Holy Eucharist as a priest at the

Chapel of the Cross. I can think of no more appropriate symbol of what has happened today than having you preside at the altar in the same chapel building where your Grandmother Cornelia was baptized in 1854.” Pauli writes of her experience celebrating the Eucharist:

On Sunday, February 13, 1977, in the little chapel where my Grandmother Cornelia had been baptized more than a century earlier as one of “Five Servant Children Belonging to Miss Mary Ruffin Smith,” I read the gospel from an ornate lectern engraved with the name of that slave-owning woman who had left part of her wealth to the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. A thoroughly interracial congregation crowded the chapel, and many more stood outside until they could enter to kneel at the altar rail and receive Communion. There was great irony in the fact that the first woman priest to preside at the altar of the church to which Ms. Mary Ruffin Smith had given her deepest devotion should be the granddaughter of the little girl she had sent to the balcony reserved for slaves. But more than irony marked that moment. Whatever future ministry I might have as a priest, it was given to me that day to be a symbol of healing.

All the strands of my life had come together. Descendant of slave and of slave owner, I had already been called poet, lawyer, teacher, and friend. Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness.”

Pauli, poet, priest, feminist, lesbian, lawyer, friend, Black activist, lover, healer, Pauli offered to the people that day the blood, sweat and tears of her struggles, of her years of wisdom and experiences. That day the blood and body of Christ took new meaning, Christ’s blood and Pauli’s blood, the life giving force of blood from Ms. Mary Ruffin Smith and of the General Convention that voted to ordain women as priests, it all mixed together that day. Everyone in that sanctuary was invited to the wedding banquet, to the great party of God’s people. The water was transformed to wine,

to very expensive wine that only the finest drink, the finest of God's people.

At the wedding party we also meet Dr. King. We was drunk on God's wine and full of God's spirit and promise for liberation and justice. He could not keep quiet, full of the knowledge that we have all the resources here on earth to create God's kingdom, God has provided us abundantly with everything we need, we just get in the way sometimes. . Full of God's creative power King was certain that the time would come where justice and freedom rule, where God's abundance rules over human stinginess and fear.

From the steps of the capitol building in Montgomery, at the end of the march from Selma to the capitol, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. closed his speech with the following words:

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you reap what you sow.

How long? Not long. Because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, 'cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.' God's truth is marching on.

God has sounded forth the trumpets that shall never call retreat. God is lifting up the hearts of humankind before God's judgment seat. Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer God. Be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on.