

Small Miracles

John 2:1-11

There was a popular bumper sticker a few years ago - PERFORM RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS. I don't see those much any more – I am not sure why, perhaps it was a fad that just went away – like most bumper stickers.

However, last week in the middle of Manhattan in 10 degree weather, I witnessed two such acts of kindness. Two colleagues and I had just finished lunch with several pastors near the 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church and ventured out to catch a cab back to our hotel. It was colder at 2 o'clock when we had entered the building a few hours before, the temperature had dropped at least 15 degrees, as what was to become a huge snow storm approached. We quickly realized that catching a cab on our immediate side of the street was hopeless. (It is easier if you try and flag on from the up side of the intersection on the left side of traffic flow.) Just as we crossed, we hailed a cab which very shortly pulled to the curb after the light changed.

As the passenger exited, we started to jump in when a very cold and angry man ran across the crosswalk, approached us, and began shouting, “This is my cab – why are you taking it?” He pointed to the down side of the intersection and explained, as we stood frozen and perplexed, that he had hailed the same cab on the other side of the intersection. He figured that he had hailed it first and that, therefore, it was his.

I, frankly was confused as my brain a little frozen along with my hands, and like a fool asked him to explain. Logic can be good, just not too useful when cars are whizzing by and a stranger is shouting at you. Susan, one of my colleagues, and a native of New York, was ready to fight for the cab – after all she was half way in when he had approached. (Many years in the city teaches survival of the fittest.) My other colleague, however, Bill Saul, simply stepped back and told the man to take the cab. Susan and I were so shocked by this act of grace and kindness, that we too stepped back. Bill is a little wiser and bigger and so we just naturally took his lead. Plus – Susan was not about to get into the cab with this crazy man.

What then ensued was interesting. The man kept verbally coming at us – trying to explain why he felt he was owed the cab. Bill just kept telling him to get in, we were sorry – we had been too hasty. Susan was cold and looked perplexed. I suggested that we let the cabbie decide – right! Bill, however, very calmly insisted the man take the cab. Then suddenly the man refused the cab. “No, no, there are three of you, it is quite cold, two of you are women, you seem late for a meeting, there are lots of cabs – please, please take it.” He backed away.

He was ready to fight for the cab if we fought, but willingly gave it up when Bill told him he could have it. So... we thanked him, got in the cab for which we were grateful.

Now when I told this story to Bud my husband upon return, he, a native of New Jersey with more experience on the streets of New York than I, he declared the whole incident a miracle. Getting a New Yorker to back down and then actually getting the cab in that situation – nothing short of a miracle, abet a small one as miracles go, but a big one in New York.

Our scripture this morning finds Jesus performing such an act of kindness one that we have come to understand to be his first miracle – turning water into wine.

Now I think that turning water into wine is a miracle and a pretty good one at that, but when you line it up with all of the other in the Bible, parting the sea, squelching an army, it might look a little small.

Now we know that this is Jesus’ first recorded miracle. He is about 30 at the time and to date, although he has begun his ministry and called disciples, he is yet to perform a miracle.

Jesus is a guest at this wedding.

The Jews attached great importance to the high moments of life. Thus a wedding was not just a brief ceremony, but an experience shared by the entire community. The typical wedding feast could last up to seven days. After the wedding the father of the bride would take his daughter to every house so that everyone might congratulate her. It was a community experience. Weddings were a time of joy.

At the wedding, which Jesus attended in Cana of Galilee, there was great joy, but a problem developed. There was a shortage of wine. Not only was that a social embarrassment, it was also a symbol. For a wedding to run out of wine was an omen that there was little chance of this particular marriage reaching its full potential, maybe joy was not meant for this couple.

So Mary approaches Jesus and asks him to do something. And although his response is a little crabby, he makes his move and gives his first public sign that he is different; he transforms water into wine.

It is a crucial moment for Jesus and the disciples.

It was a custom in that time to serve the best wine first and the lesser at the end of a celebration. This is not just about taste, the “best wine” contained the higher percentage of alcohol. It takes time to ferment wine and time is money. So when this fermented wine is presented to the master of the banquet near the end of the festivities he is impressed. The earlier wine had been good, but this was even better.

Turning water into wine is a big deal for this situation, but let's be honest, it is a smaller act perhaps than feeding 5000 or calming the sea or walking on it. The miracle was known only to a few: the disciples and the servants who brought the water in, and, to Mary. But it was significant for the moment and certainly in an historical Biblical context. In comparison you have to wonder if he is starting out slowly. I think not. The world does not yet know, but at that wedding, his mother's knowledge is confirmed. The disciples get it. A wedding feast and a simple miracle are still talked about in the 21st century.

A miracle for sure, this turning water into wine, although not random, is it an act of kindness. A gesture that impresses the father of the bride and many of the guests, but Jesus as the source of this power remains anonymous. The impact of what he does however is far reaching. The party goes on. The father is not embarrassed. The bride is not put to shame. We still teach and preach about it today.

I am not sure just how my friend's act of grace affected that stranger later in the day. I hope that someone will pay him the kindness on a cold and chilly day – just as he did to us. But for the moment

– grace changed him from an angry New Yorker, ready to do battle over a cab, to one who backed down and gave up the very thing he wanted in that moment. A miracle, the result of a simple gesture.

This scripture speaks to us on many fronts. We, as disciples, learn of Jesus’ greatness, his glory and his power. But we also learn that being a Christian is perhaps most significant in the small acts that we do. Acts that are perhaps known only to a few. Taking a meal to someone who is sick, visiting a friend in the hospital, tutoring a child on Monday afternoon – offering a cab to a stranger on a cold afternoon. Oh, I suppose taking out a full page ad or marching in the street might do it, but Jesus did not come as the conquering hero in a white horse. He was born a Jew when it was not a very good time for Jews, he was raised by a tradesman and his wife, he was perhaps just another guest at a wedding celebration. A man who was considered a guest, respectful of his host, doing what he could at the moment, not boasting of his accomplishment.

He touches the wedding and lifts it not just with the miracle, but also by his presence. He takes this ordinary wedding and he transforms into that which is extraordinary. He takes a fisherman by the name of Peter and transforms him into the great preacher of Christendom. He takes a young frail and frightened girl by the name of Teresa, and transforms her into a Pulitzer Prize of Peace by the name of Mother Teresa. On this long weekend we remember how he took a preacher names Martin and started a revolution of equality and justice. He takes you and me as we are. – God takes that which is ordinary and transforms it.

We often hear that we are past the age of miracles – that Christ’s culture required him to perform miracles for him to be recognized, believed. We tell ourselves that miracles are not within our power.

And yet, broken hearts are mended by the words – I am sorry.

Healing takes place when one of you visits someone in the hospital or someone unable to come to church.

A child figures out a math problem, because a retired professor took the time to explain, maybe twice.

It may take many in the world 2000 more years to get it, what Mary and the disciples got that day at the wedding in Cana...

That God became man and walked the earth, that Christ gave his life for you and for me and everyone else, but.....until then, small miracles occur in random acts of kindness

New Yorkers give up taxi cabs in 10 degree weatherwhen grace abounds.