

Do We Believe in One Another?

On the eve of both Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Inauguration Day, today's scripture readings (one depicting Jesus powerful impact at a wedding celebration and the other a vignette from Apostle Paul about many diverse gifts coming from one Spirit) invite us to wonder: Do we believe in one another? We recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered via live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future.

As we begin this time of reflection, let's join our hearts together in prayer: God of all, because you live within each of the 341 million people of this land, your love and wisdom hold space for the deep tensions we are experiencing. Speak to us today through the communities that surrounded Jesus and Paul. Help us find new avenues and renewed commitment to believing in one another. We ask it in the name of Jesus – the one who believed in us. Amen.

As this MLK and Inauguration weekend approached, a beloved quote from Dr. Maya Angelou has been stirring within me. She said, *"I've learned that people will forget what you've said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* The Rev. Dr. King has stirred many feelings – both during his brief life and in the 57 years that have played out since his assassination. While he is now fairly widely admired, a 1966 Gallup poll at the height of his career revealed that 66 percent of Americans viewed him unfavorably. On other hand, many over the years have felt **inspired** in their own pursuit of justice by his clarion call to build a beloved community and by his bold efforts toward securing equal human rights for historically oppressed people groups in this land.

I sense that King believed in the power of possibility – that people committed to working together across differences could realize the dream that he articulated and that so many shared with him. In his “I Have a Dream” speech in Aug. 1963, King (referring to his faith in the possibility that we could realize the dream of a beloved community) said: "*With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.*" When we find ourselves in a state of overwhelming despair, we feel a void where hope had been but now feels absent. Other feelings clamor to fill the void of despair – such as sadness, anxiety, anger, complacency. **I wonder: Are you staring down a mountain of despair over circumstances in our shared public life as a nation or in your own personal life? Are sadness, anxiety, anger and complacency forming foothills within that mountain of despair that is blocking your path?**

How might you, how might we "*hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope?*" I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so and to sit for a moment with a question. Then we'll speak aloud any stones we wish to share with others. **In these times, when so many people are desperately longing for a stone of hope, where have you found an experience of hope that you can hew out of the mountain of despair?** Let's open our eyes to one another. Would anyone care to name aloud their stone of hope? [*In this church – with this community, I find that I can undo the sadness. In grandchildren. In long-time high school friends. A call to a daughter when struggling.*] Let's be on the lookout to recognize from where we hew our stones of hope.

In a February 1968 speech in Washington DC (just two months before he would be assassinated), King said: "*We must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope.*" How did he sustain an experience of infinite hope amidst adversity?

Much has been written about King's journey with depression as well as his fear that his life would be taken from him. He and Maya Angelou were contemporaries, working together through the SCLC. 39-year old King was killed on Angelou's fortieth birthday.

I imagine that King was keenly aware of how others made him feel and that each supportive partnership in justice work was like a stone of hope hewn from the mountain of despair. I imagine that he demonstrated to his companions how he believed in them (in their capacity to chance our society for the better) and that he felt their belief in him. He may have had the wisdom to practice his own teachings – to accept the finite disappointment of each setback without losing touch with infinite hope he knew through his faith in God and in the human community. **I wonder: Is there a specific finite disappointment (again, either in our shared public life or in your own personal life) that you need to accept in order to hold on to infinite hope?**

Let's turn to our gospel reading for today – the story of the miracle at the wedding in Cana. The inspiration for today's question ("Do we believe in one another?") came first from Jesus' mother Mary, depicted on the cover of our worship bulletin saying, "*Do whatever he tells you.*" Yet there are other threads of believing in one another if we pay close attention. Jesus and the servants chose to trust each other. And the gathered people came to trust Jesus' power as well. Let's unpack this a bit.

The story begins with a problem – the wine had run out at the wedding celebration where Jesus, his mother and his disciples were in attendance. We heard, "*When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said... 'what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come.'*"

His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" We can relate to this moment in any number of ways. First, Jesus had a sense of inward call – he knew God was calling him to ministry of teaching and healing, but he seemed to be hesitant to act boldly in public at this early juncture. Sometimes we need a nudge from the outside to recognize how our gifts can meet a need in the present moment.

Enter Mother Mary. She had no doubt that he was capable of ministering in a powerful way. She had been pondering this in her heart for several decades by then, after all. Mary also felt confident enough that Jesus was nearing readiness to show up in bolder and bolder ways that she tipped off the servants to be open to Jesus' input if it were to emerge. **I wonder: who could thank for being someone who has believed in you and nudged you forward into fruitful action in your life? And whom have you nudged in that way?** It takes believing in one another.

The story continues: *"Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet.' So they took it."* Jesus spoke with confidence and, I do not doubt, collaborative respect. Those servants with responsibility for holding together all the details of the celebration took note and followed him. **I wonder: will we continue to nurture this kind of mutually respectful culture as St. Croix United Church? Will we recognize skill and insight shared and come alongside one another as partners in ministry?**

Finally, we heard this: *"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."* As a Christian church, we think of ourselves as one manifestation of the body of Christ.

The question of the moment is this: Will people in the St. Croix Valley find in us a true manifestation of the way of Jesus – this way of believing that God’s Spirit works through each of us? Paul believed it. Let’s hear his blessing (just a snippet of it) again: *“Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”* Will our neighbors in the valley see us manifesting that belief in one another?

Today I wanted to share with you a story of a time early in my ministry. I had tried teaching. I had tried other things. And I had arrived to St. Paul’s UCC on Summit Avenue in St. Paul as an intern somewhere around age 30. And I had no idea if I would be any good at trying to learn how to become a pastor in a church. So I was there to give it a shot – there to be an intern. I would follow it with a summer as a chaplain intern at Abbott Northwestern Hospital before returning to St. Paul’s UCC for eight more years in a growing capacity of pastoral ministry.

We had a monthly Evensong service (a contemplative service filled with chants, the singing bowl, and a reading shared several times). My mentor’s spouse was in attendance one evening, halfway into my internship year. And Garth (now a good friend of our family) came up to me and offered some word of affirmation, saying something like, ‘NormaRae sure is enjoying working with you as an intern.’ And it came to my mind to be honest to him (whom I had only met several times at the point). I said, “You know, I’m a pretty confident person. But I think NormaRae believes in me even more than I believe in myself.” And he said something like, ‘well I know she experiences gifts for ministry working alongside you.’

And that conversation has stuck with me forever, because it truly was a moving experience in my life to have someone believe in me so fully that they would trust me in relationship and in collaborative work together.

So again, I ask us, do we believe in one another within this church. Because folx, buckle in! We are about to enter into our strategic planning phase for the next few months. And it will be vulnerable at best, it will be gritty often, it will matter a ton, and we will need to trust one another and know that wisdom and insight will come from each of us.

So may we believe in one another, because God's love is counting on us.
Amen!

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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John 2:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11