2nd Sunday after Epiphany – January 19, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 2:1-11 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, IL

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow, in addition to being inauguration day, is also Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, which has been a national holiday since 1986. I don't know how much you've thought about that holiday – why we have it, or what it has to do with you. This was the weekend we took the youth group of my previous congregation in Carbondale up to Wausau, Wisconsin to go skiing. But aside from having another day off work, I'm going to hazard a guess that most of us don't often give it much more thought than that.

It occurred to me, though, as I was studying the texts for this week, especially in light of our readings from last week, that the MLK observance is more relevant to us than we may have thought. I'm going to try to make that case this morning and hope that it helps us appreciate the depth of meaning available to us in John's gospel when we look a bit closer.

Last week we celebrated Jesus' baptism, and one of the important meanings of that not emphasized in my sermon last week, is that Jesus' baptism was an act of solidarity with us sinful human beings. John the Baptist, you'll remember, was administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus didn't need to repent or to be forgiven. As the Son of God he was, by definition, without sin. There was nothing separating him from God. But he received John's baptism anyway. And he did that in order to immerse himself fully in our human condition, so that he could rescue us from our predicament and open up a new and better life for us. But I did emphasize last week our connection to Jesus by our own baptism into his death and resurrection. That means that we also share his full immersion in the lives of our fellow human beings. Baptismal life in Christ is not, and cannot be, a life lived in isolation from others. It connects us to the whole human race, which God is still working to rescue, redeem, and heal.

So that's the first, and more obvious connection to the MLK holiday. Martin Luther King, Jr. devoted his life, and ultimately *gave* his life, to improve the lives of people who have been exploited, oppressed, and marginalized because of the color of their skin, something that is deeply imbedded in the history and culture of our country. If we are in Christ, then the plight of exploited, oppressed, and marginalized people is not someone else's problem. It is ours too, because it is Christ's. That makes this not merely a social or political issue. It becomes a theological and religious issue as well. It's no accident that The Rev. Dr. King was a Christian pastor. He saw that intimate connection of racial justice to our faith, and he opened the eyes and hearts of countless others to that connection.

The second, and less obvious connection, is that the civil rights movement casts a light on the social situation of the early church, particularly the community of Christians that John was writing to. We're only popping into the Gospel of John for one Sunday before returning to Luke for most of the rest of the year (except for the Easter Season), so this is our chance to think about that. And it helps to remember that the early church originated in an exploited, oppressed, and marginalized community on the edge of the Roman empire, and was spread throughout the empire in the early centuries by other exploited, oppressed, and marginalized people – mostly slaves. John's gospel is written for these kinds of people, who developed a strong sense of community with an insider-outsider mentality as a natural defense mechanism. That's a normal thing for marginalized communities even today. It's reflected throughout John's Gospel, and accounts for some the odd things you've probably noticed. It shows up in the story in chapter three when Nicodemus is confused by Jesus talking about being born again, or in chapter 6 when

Jesus is talking about eating his flesh. John's community knew that Jesus was referring to Baptism and Holy Communion, and they probably enjoyed the humor of outsiders not getting it. Something like that is going on in our text this morning when Jesus' mother tells him that the marriage feast has run out of wine and he responds, "My hour has not yet come." The insiders in John's community know that already here at the beginning of chapter two he is referring to his crucifixion – and that's not even the first hint in this Gospel. Jesus' mother is suggesting that he should save the day for this wedding. Because it would be a shameful thing for the groom's family to run out of wine at this party they were throwing, and it would damage the family's reputation for years to come. But in the context of the world's problems, this is pretty small potatoes. Jesus did not come into the world to save families from social awkwardness, just as he did not come to find you a parking place on a crowded shopping day, or provide good weather for the picnic you have planned. So Jesus is hinting here that he really *is* going to save the day, the whole world even, just not yet. (I mean, it's only chapter two!) Again, the insiders in John's community would have gotten this. But he does go ahead and save the day for this wedding anyway, and he does so as a sign of what he's really up to. In modern times we've tended to focus on the miraculous dimension of these signs, as if that's all that's going on. Jesus does these things that only God could do, proving that he's God, and that's why we should believe in him. Now, that's *part* of what is going on, but not the most important part. The most important part is given to the steward who tastes the wine. "You have saved the best for last!" he says to the bridegroom. Neither the steward nor the bridegroom knows what has happened. But the servants know. The least of the least know, and that is John's audience. This one who is the word-made-flesh, who was present at the creation of the world, the one through whom all things were made, he has made himself known to them. And he's got even better things in store, for them and for the world. The best is yet to come.

Exploited, oppressed, and marginalized communities of every time and place need that kind of news. They need to know that the world as it is is *not* the world as it was meant to be, that God is at work on their behalf to give them life as it was meant to be. And those communities can help the rest of us to see that we need that kind of news too, even those who have been the beneficiaries of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization. That comes across in John's Gospel too. The second sign Jesus performs is to save the life of a centurion's child. A Roman. An outsider. An oppressor.

I don't know where all of you are at today in your life, whether you are feeling oppressed by life's circumstances, on top of the world, or somewhere in between. Some of us are mourning the death of loved ones. Others are dealing with medical challenges of one kind or another. Some are caretakers for parents, or spouses, or children who can't take care of themselves. Some are facing stress at work or in relationships. And for still others, life is pretty good at the moment. Wherever you are at today, Jesus' sign is for you too. Jesus is imbedded in our human reality for us and for our salvation, and the best is yet to come. Jesus' death and resurrection are fixing what we have broken and bringing forth a new creation. Trusting that good news will get us through the difficulties we face, and it will draw us into the lives of others to share their burdens and their joys, and make us agents of God's reconciling love. May we take some time this week to hear the stories of our sisters and brothers in exploited, oppressed, and marginalized communities. May our eyes and hearts be open to the signs of God's work among us, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.