

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

One of the things it took me years to do is pay attention to all the stories in the Gospels where Jesus acts very human. Those times when he yells or loses his patience, when he needs space and seeks solitude, and when he seems to react out of his own sense of discomfort and vulnerability.

Often these moments are paired with Jesus also demonstrating his divinity – like we find in today's gospel reading from John, the story of a wedding in Cana.

The human part comes first, in the guise of a conversation with his mother. Is this not the perfect parent/child interaction? His mother tells him to do something and he snappishly responds.

*They have no wine.*

*Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.*

I can only imagine the tone of voice that each used. The looks they exchanged. Their body language. There must have been at least one dramatic eye roll (I'm betting on Jesus' part).

And yet, for all of his snark, Jesus complied with his mother's request (as she seemed to know he would) and turned the water in the stone jars into wine so the celebration could continue. It was the first of his signs – or miracles – recorded in the gospels.

But what are we to make of that initial response to Mary's prompt? That human response to being needed to do more or be better. Is it *just* a typical parent/child power dynamic – or is it more?

In this story, Jesus is full grown and just launching his ministry. In the verses immediately prior to today's passage we read about Jesus' calling of the first disciples, which in John's gospel is not Jesus seeking out followers, but instead being recognized as the Messiah as he walked past them.

The proclaimed him that without seeing him "do" anything. But if he was waiting for an opportunity to show them, the wine running out at the wedding certainly provided one. Seeing him not take the initiative himself, his mother prompted him – in that way that all parents push their children to live up to their potential – and after some grumbling, he complied: he took that first step, on a journey that would see so many steps as he traveled and crossed boundaries, but which would ultimately take him to Jerusalem at the end.

I can't help but wonder if that is why he hesitated, why he talked back to his mama and seems so human here. He knew that performing that sign would set into motion a ministry that would challenge those in power, that would draw attention for pushing back against the status quo, that would speak truth and love – over and above – comfort and silence.

What an uncomfortable and vulnerable place to be. And yet one we can relate to – as these are such very human feelings.

So here's my question for today – what makes you uncomfortable? How do you react when you're uncomfortable? *[not rhetorical!]*

*[continue]*

Itchy sweaters make me uncomfortable, so I don't wear them. (avoidance)

I've had some medical tests and procedures that have made me uncomfortable, but I've gone ahead with them because the benefit outweighed the cost. (suck it up buttercup)

I'm uncomfortable when I make mistakes or let someone down, so I've learned to have the courage to take responsibility, make amends – and \*try\* to be gentle with myself at 2 am when it all replays in my head. (accountability and mercy)

Discomfort, though, is not just something we experience as individuals – it can also show up in our wider cultural contexts.

This weekend we celebrate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet even after fifty+ years since his martyrdom, and the progress that has been made in the United States, issues of race – and class – still make Americans uncomfortable. And I'll add an addendum here – it makes white Americans uncomfortable. I'll make that an "I statement" – it makes this white American uncomfortable. But that doesn't mean we can just avoid it.

Why are we uncomfortable? There are too many reasons to unpack in one sermon, but I think a big part of the discomfort is because we don't want to be called racist.

Never mind that there are layers to what racism means – and therefore to being racist. When we say the word racist, we think of the ugliest, most overt and derogatory thing possible. We think of a Congressman who espouse white supremacy, and misguided high school students who mock and bully a Native American veteran – like we saw yesterday at the Lincoln Memorial. Being racist means we are a "bad person."

The issue, though, is that too often we reduce and equate racism with only personal actions – and because our discomfort is triggered and our emotions are stirred – we don't pay attention instead to the systems that have built up over decades and centuries that work to keep the status quo (especially when we are beneficiaries of that status quo) – and we can't get to that work until

we've done the personal work).

I believe this understanding of racism as only personal is why so many of us react defensively and snappishly and are emotionally reactive around issues of race in America. These reactions are the results of feeling vulnerable.

When we feel vulnerable, we get uncomfortable. Because race and racism are so charged in our society, feelings of guilt and shame pop up – either because we feel them or because we “think” we should, or because we think others are telling us we should. It can all feel out of control – certainly out of our comfort zones.

It's why so many of us love to play the blame game. When we feel vulnerable and uncomfortable we react and lash out at others – whether that be individuals or entire groups of people. Add to that the outrage and blame meme factories that are always in production – on all sides of every issue – and it is almost too easy to click “share” and not have to face our discomfort and work through it meaningfully.

Now I've said the magic words of vulnerability, shame, and blame – which means the next thing I'm going to talk about is Brené Brown.

Brené's research on blame is a revelation. In a short video<sup>1</sup> made to illustrate one of her TED Talks, she tells a funny story about dropping her coffee cup one morning, and before it had even finished shattering on the floor she said, “Damn you Steve.”

Now Steve is her husband. And the night before he was at water polo practice with his team, and when they talked earlier in the day, she told him to be home by 10:00 because she can't go to sleep if he's not home. Well, Steve didn't get home until 10:30 – so of course she got to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reply-mc.com/shortcuts/brene-brown-on-blaming/>

sleep late. Which is why she was having a second cup of coffee the next morning – the cup that she then dropped and shattered everywhere. “Damn you Steve.”

Funny and relatable story, yes, but her research sheds light on why we so readily turn to blame – whether it’s others or ourselves. Because, blame is the discharging of discomfort and pain. It is literally a way for us to try and get rid of those hard uncomfortable feelings without dealing with them meaningfully.

But here’s the thing, blame has an inverse relationship with accountability. When we blame, we don’t change anything – our relationships, our behaviors, and especially ourselves. It’s a cop out.

Because we, like Jesus, know deep down inside of us, that if we begin the journey of facing our feelings, our discomfort, our vulnerability – and really do the deep work of looking at not just our hearts and actions, it will mean we have to leave the status quo behind and be transformed (also like Jesus).

Not to mention, what if Jerusalem – literally or figuratively – is waiting for us at the end of the journey too?

But here’s the thing, life is a journey. You can’t stay the same – even if you stay in the same place – even if that would be the most comfortable. It’s just not possible to stay the same, and so every day we get to make choices about where the journey will take us and how we will live it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The time is always right to do the right thing.”

So let us strive to do right things – even when we’re uncomfortable – because seeking connection with others, through discomfort, makes space for empathy. And empathy, I believe, is as close to a miracle as we see in our day and age.

~ AMEN ~