

1/17/2010

Second Sunday of Epiphany - John 2:1-11; Is 62:1-5

The wedding at Cana is Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John. We call it a miracle, but John is very careful never to call any of Jesus' miraculous actions 'miracles'.

Instead, he uses the Greek word 'simeon',  
which is best translated as 'signs'.

It is where we get the words 'semaphore' or 'semantics' or 'signs'.

Semaphore is the coded language of flags used in nautical communication.

And semantics is the study of word meanings.

So when John uses this Greek word for what Jesus is doing, when he calls them signs rather than miracles, John is saying that Jesus **is** communicating something about what Jesus means to us.

In other words,  
miracles,

the miraculous,

the signs of the times,

never point to themselves.

They always point to the source of the event rather than the event.

In fact, signs do not exist to prove anything.

They are instead like flag signals which communicate important information about where we are going and what is intended in a particular action.

Signs and miracles demand interpretation and a determined seeking after meaning.

They never stand for themselves.

We have just celebrated Jesus' baptism last week  
and just before that, his birth in Bethlehem.

All of these things point to Jesus

and what Jesus has done

and is doing in our lives.

This week, though, our readings from Isaiah and from John's Gospel point us to the depth of meaning in what Jesus has done and is doing.

The setting for both texts is significant.

In Isaiah, the people are returning to Jerusalem after their time as exiles from the home of their ancestors.

God presents this return to their home and to God as a marriage -

the people of God wedded to the Lord of the people.

**Isaiah 62:4-5** says: READ FROM BIBLE - *Hephzibah = my delight is in her;*  
*Beulah = married.*

Likewise, in our Gospel story today, Jesus is at a wedding.

**John 2:1.**

Weddings are quite an event -

they are now and they were back then.

They are a celebration of  
families coming together,  
friends reunited and promises  
and vows made.

There is music,  
speeches,  
lots of food  
and always the wine.

But most of all, regardless of what the relationships are between family members and friends from the past, there is always love.

The focus of a wedding is on the relationship of love between the couple getting married.

At this particular wedding,  
a great disaster is in the making,  
a faux pas of a higher order is about to happen,  
a huge cultural misstep is in the offing.

The couple putting on the wedding has run out of wine.

In these times, a wedding was usually a several day affair, which means a lot of food and a lot of wine.

Further, the groom was required to provide for all of it.

If he failed to provide for the guests, his reputation was put to the test and in some circumstances could have been the basis for a lawsuit.

Worst of all, to the family of the bride it could give the whiff of deception and misdirection of the groom's ability to provide for his new wife.

This gives us something to think about with regard to weddings, and more particularly our relationship to God and Christ.

In ancient Israel, a wedding was an opportunity to  
provide for the guests,  
the families of the bride and bridegroom  
and the bride.

Not just a little bit.

Not in a token sort of way.

But abundantly,

with abandon,

with a sense that the present celebration is really all there is and ever will be.

Gloriously and without reservation giving everything one has away in the name of love.

At the same time, this is a lot of pressure for the poor groom.

Providing for all those people at the party.

Looking to the future to provide well for his wife and probably future children.

Impressing the in-laws.

And then to be running out of wine.

We can imagine the groom sweating and wiping his brow  
as the party draws on into the day,

as he tries to put on a brave, happy face for the occasion, but deep inside fear and the potential of great humiliation looms with each passing moment.

Jesus' mom tells him, "*They have no more wine.*"

Mary doesn't tell the chief steward.

She doesn't tell the bridegroom,

who undoubtedly is well aware of the situation  
as he smiles and sweats and suffers  
the inevitable outcome.

She tells Jesus, the only person present who can do something about it.

If we understand God to be first and foremost about grace and love, as John says in his first letter,

*"God is love" (4:9),*

a lot of things in the Bible begin to make sense.

Even difficult sayings, when heard in the context of love and grace, begin to gain clarity.

I think this story today is speaking to the overwhelming abundance of God's love.

Jesus has this strange little exchange with his mother,

and it ends with Jesus' mom saying to the servants,

*"Do whatever he tells you."*

Jesus moves from being

merely the guest at a wedding,

just another person at the table,

to the one who tells all who serve what to do next. So Jesus tells the servants to fill  
the 6 stone water jars nearby with water.

Now, these are not small little jars.

They each hold 20-30 gallons of water.

That is a lot of water.

180 gallons.

Jesus turns all of it to wine.

And it is really good wine,

according to the chief steward of the banquet. Normally, the best wine is given first  
because by the end of the wedding celebration everyone has had so much to drink  
they don't care what the old wine tastes like.

Jesus provides for the wedding far more than could ever be drunk by the people.

Jesus provides abundantly and with abandon.

And it is really good stuff.

God has saved the best until now.

You know, we read these stories every Sunday, maybe from the Old Testament or maybe from the New Testament.

It is easy to pick and choose.

We can avoid very easily talking about the difficult parts of the Bible -

God telling Joshua to do to that town what you did to Jericho, namely, kill everyone and everything and burn down all the buildings;

Sodom and Gomorrah;

the Prophets breathing destruction and exile to the people of God, then watching it all be fulfilled;

Jesus talking about outer darkness and consuming fires;

Paul excommunicating people and giving them over to Satan, condemning whole categories of unrepentant sinners;

and of course, the chaos of Revelation -

we can avoid these parts and just focus on the feel-good parts, like today's great event.

Isn't it lovely,

all this love

and overabundance

and great display of care

and compassion by Jesus?

We reach out into that great future laid out to us and then try to force our present world into all this glory and peace and love and idealism.

Except it doesn't fit.

Telling ourselves,

*"If I just think positively;*

*If I just pray the right prayer;*

*If I just keep focusing on the future rather than the present..."*

will only go so far,

and then we must face the reality of

the lost job,

the failing health,

the empty bank account,

the crushing humiliation of being unable to provide for oneself and one's family.

I am a Christian for several reasons, many of which I have very little understanding about.

But one of the main reasons is because I believe the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ match most closely my experience of reality.

The Christian faith comes closest to the truth, as far as I can perceive it.

I don't claim to be an expert in world religions and nor do I want to get into a discussion of what makes one religion true and what makes one less true, but I have experimented heavily and seriously with all the primary faiths and with some more obscure ones as well.

And the question I have always tried to ask is,

*"What do I care about?*

*Why do I care about it?"*

Once that is answered, the next question is,

*"Is it worth fighting for?"*

*Is it worth exploring and seeking what it means?"*

Maybe it is.

Maybe it isn't.

When I hear Pat Robertson say the Haitian earthquake happened because Haiti made a pact with Satan, I wonder if it isn't worth fighting for anymore.

But at the same time, I have gotten to the point where I care enough to not let anyone else define the faith for me.

Instead, I accept that the Christian faith is based on a relationship with a person, Jesus Christ, and thus God.

Not a flesh and blood person,  
but a being who exhibits all the qualities of personhood.

And since it is based on a relationship with a person,  
it is not really a religion as we understand religion.

It is weirder than that.

It is more meaningful than that.

It is more than the 4 walls of this church.

It is more than the words in this book we use to define our story.

It is more than spirituality and

it is more than doctrine.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day, where we celebrate and honor the extension of civil rights to all people in our nation.

It is hard to believe, based on our constitution and our supposed beliefs in freedom and democracy, that it took until 1964 to end governmental and electoral discrimination, at least on the level of the law

and it took until 1968 to end discrimination for housing.

Love takes a long time.

True love happens in the midst of great trouble and difficulty.

It emerges out of the mess of our lives together,  
not separate from the mess.

The foundation for the coming of Jesus in John's Gospel -  
and also in our celebration of Christmas and Christ's baptism -  
is darkness.

**READ John 1:3-9.**

The light is beautiful,  
powerful

and enduring,

but it arises out of darkness.

We cannot pretend that only the light exists.

We cannot sit around and think God is going to just do it without our input and going out into the world.

The Civil Rights movement, in its non-violent manifestation through Martin Luther King, Jr., was successful in part because above every thing else,  
MLK's message was one of love in the face of great darkness.  
He cared enough to fight for the light of love.  
He cared enough to stand and seek out the relationship Christ calls us to with God and others.  
For MLK, the Civil Rights movement always pointed beyond itself to the greater unity of all humankind promised by Jesus and the Prophets.  
The success of the movement,  
which MLK did not get to see fully realized when he was gunned down in 1968,  
still points beyond itself.

When we participate in the abundant love of God,  
it means we might be getting down into some deep and dirty stuff.  
New, good wine can overturn the traditions of a thousand years. Abundant love and its hope and promise can point to the first of many signs that God is present among us  
and loves us beyond anything we can imagine.

For the young bridegroom in our story today,  
Jesus' act of love and abundance frees him from the concerns of culture, money and pride.  
In the face of those things which always point us to God and Christ, even our experience of tragedy changes.

Listen to this poem by Kathy Coffey,  
called *The Cana Couple Reminisce*:

*That was only the beginning:*

*Ached and awkward we were then,  
Embarrassed enough without the wine incident,  
Indebted to Mary's son for flow of joy.*

*Ever since it has been miracle:*

*Touching the shoreline of the other in our sleep,  
Waking warm beneath our roof,  
Hoing the wheat shoots in our fields.*

*Even the threats brought blessing:*

*Brooding death intensified our life,  
Illness taught nurture of cherished child,  
The needy repaid us with Cana's own poor gold.*

*Our union was not singular; we fought  
And sulked, sickened like the other folk.*

*But in every glass of common water,  
We tasted hints of garnet-gold.*

*(from Theology Today, Vol 48, No. 4, Jan 1992)*

*"In every glass we tasted hints of garnet-gold."*

The light and love of Christ touches everything, however little. The light struggles to be free,  
even in the midst of fire-hoses,  
dogs trained to bite and harm,

guns leveled at college students.

The sip of the good wine lurks ever so slightly on the lips of the injured child in Haiti,  
the suffering mother's tears,  
the starving brother or sister in war-torn places around our world.  
Somewhere, God's abundant love waits to overflow and overcome the oppression of culture,  
the tyranny of separation between  
rich and poor,  
faithful and faithless,  
hated and hating,  
the destruction of personhood perpetrated through  
slavery and discrimination.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said once said this about the nature of love:

*Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it.*

*Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it.*

*Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.*

What are we willing to fight for?

What do we care about?

Are we willing to accept the new name God gives to us

as we return to our true home,

a life in and with God?

Are we willing to look beyond the event itself,

to look through the sign into the deeper meaning of what we have been given by God?

Are we able to look toward what releases,

harmonizes and illuminates our life

and especially the life of others,

even in the midst of darkness,

pain and suffering?

The taste of that good wine is in there, somewhere.

Like the disciples,

when we find it,

we are astonished.

The best has been saved for last.

In those signs,

we see the glory of Jesus being revealed

and it is there where we can find our faith.

Amen.