

**Sunday, January 16, 2022**  
**Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)**

Isaiah 62.1-5; John 2.1-11

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/341373504264105>

*(Sermon begins at about 14:55)*

**“All Are Invited”**

In this year, Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary, we are blessed to have the opportunity to look at all three of the traditional focal points for Epiphany. The three events through which Jesus’ identity is revealed. These three are the visit of the Magi, which we commemorate on Epiphany; the baptism of Jesus, which we commemorate on the first Sunday after Epiphany (last Sunday); and Jesus turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana. While we have the opportunity to celebrate the first two events every year, we only get the story of the Wedding at Cana once every three years. Which is really too bad because it is a pretty awesome story. Awesome because it reveals some things about Jesus that are not readily apparent in the coming of the Magi or Jesus’ baptism.

The coming of the Magi represents the fact that Jesus came into the world for all people. And his baptism contains his anointing by God for divine service and marks the beginning of his public ministry. But the Wedding at Cana, in many ways, goes far deeper than these other two events, truly pointing to just who Jesus is as the Son of God, and therefore, revealing something about God, as well. But, of course, we have to dig into the story, examine some of the nuances, for this revelation to become clear. But an effort that is well worth it.

Before we dig deeper into the Wedding at Cana, we need to take a brief look at the Gospel according to John in general. At how it is organized. Specifically, that John organizes his Gospel around seven miracles, which he calls “signs.” These signs reveal a great deal about Jesus’ identity and his mission. Even more so, the signs presented are meant to point beyond themselves, and even beyond Jesus’ identity, to the revelation of who God is in and through Jesus Christ.

But it is this first sign, the changing of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana, that really sets the tone for what follows. John’s use of the term “signs” is a clue to the purpose of these miraculous events. To point to something worth paying attention to. To guide us on our journey to deeper relationship with God, just as road signs point the way and guide us to our destination. And just like road signs, these signs that John talks about are not the destination. They are but a pale comparison of what John is trying to convey about Jesus. Just as a sign pointing to a destination, say the Grand Canyon, is nothing compared to the magnificence of the Grand Canyon itself.

We actually see this in John’s Gospel. There are a number of places where Jesus chastises the disciples or others for fixating on a miraculous event to the extent that they miss the point. As he says in Chapter 4: “Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe” (Jn 4.48). In Chapter 6 he lays into the crowd because they are essentially stalking him and obsessed with

the fact that he fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread, but miss the point that he himself is the bread of life. That he will provide nourishment beyond their wildest imaginations. And that's what is happening here, in the Wedding at Cana. It is easy to become enamored with the act of changing water into wine that we miss what that actually signifies. What that one act points to. That we take a selfie standing in front of the sign and then turn around and go home before getting to the Grand Canyon. So, let's not just stop at the sign, but continue on to the destination. Or at least, a clearer picture of the destination.

The fact that Jesus' first sign occurs at a wedding is no accident. To the Jews, marriage was a common image used to illustrate the relationship—the ideal, if not in actual fact—between God and his people. We see this illustrated in our Old Testament lesson from the Prophet Isaiah. This passage foretells the restoration of Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, following the Babylonian Exile. In this oracle, we hear “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is 62.4-5). An expression of God's hope and desire for reconciliation between himself and his people. A renewed relationship that is as sacred and as intimate as that between a married couple. A relationship that is an expression of God's unbounded and unconditional love for his people. Elsewhere in scripture we see wedding imagery used, as well. With God—or Jesus—as the bridegroom, and God's people—or the Church—as the bride.

Of course, a wedding signifies and celebrates the union of two people, the beginning of a new life together. The fact that Jesus' first sign was at a wedding is an indication, a clue, as to the relationship that Jesus—and by extension, God—wants with his people. That this is a renewal of the ancient imagery of God as bridegroom and the people as bride. That through Jesus, a new relationship, the beginning of a new life together, is taking place. One characterized by unbounded and unconditional love.

The sign Jesus performs focuses on a very specific act: the changing of water into wine. As we hear in the story, the wine has run out. This is far more than a mere inconvenience. More than an embarrassment. Which is perhaps why Jesus' mother was so concerned. Wedding celebrations were big deals. Really big deals. They often lasted an entire week, and wine was considered an essential component. Wine—an abundance of wine—was considered a sign of hospitality. Not to mention a social lubricant, just as in our own day. Running out of wine would have been a major embarrassment for the hosts. Beyond that, the running out of wine in this particular wedding actually gives us a clue about the wedding party and the host family. The fact that they ran out of wine indicated that they were probably not wealthy—that they were just ordinary folk. A wealthy family would have provided plenty of wine. Not only that, it was also customary for the guests to also bring wine to contribute to the festivities. So, running out of wine would have indicated that both the hosts and the guests were ordinary folk without a lot of resources.

This is another clue about the relationship that Jesus is establishing with the people. That this relationship is not with the rich and powerful, not with the movers and shakers of the day, not with royalty or with the religious authorities. Not that such people are excluded. But having

Jesus' first sign occur at the wedding of ordinary folk says something about this new relationship between God and his people that will occur through Jesus. That this relationship is open to everyone. Including—particularly—ordinary people. Those who, for the most part, do not have abundant resources. Those who do not have power or prestige. Ordinary people, like you and me.

And then, of course, there is the part of the story of changing of water into wine that we generally think about. That we always talk about. The sheer abundance. We are told that “there were six stone jars . . . each holding twenty or thirty gallons” (Jn 2.6). You can do the math. That’s between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. That’s between 600 and 900 bottles of wine. That’s a LOT of wine. Way more than enough for the duration of the wedding feast. As we’ve all heard regarding this miracle, this is an extravagant demonstration of the absolute abundance of God’s love for us. Far beyond anything we have ever experienced.

That’s quantity. But what about quality? As the steward says to the bridegroom: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now” (Jn 2.10). This stuff is obviously better than the good stuff they started the party with. The implication being that the wine Jesus provided was “top-shelf.” Far superior to any other wine. Again, giving an indication of the quality of God’s love for his people. That he only wants the best for us. The absolute best.

Some may ask, “Well, if God wants us to have only the best and to have it in abundance, why aren’t we all living in palaces, eating the most sumptuous food, and drinking the absolute best wine? Why is there so much woe in the world?” Which admittedly is one of the great mysteries that has troubled theologians for countless ages. It almost seems as if the story of the Wedding at Cana may be the theological equivalent of painting oneself into a corner.

All we can really say is that there is what God desires for his people and then there is what happens when human desires interfere and gum up the works. Which I’m sure continually breaks God’s heart. But, as we know, God has chosen not to override our freewill. What such accounts as today’s Gospel do provide us is the assurance that despite what goes on down here on Earth; despite the pain and suffering we experience on a daily basis, despite the poverty, despite the injustice, despite the cruelty, God loves us beyond measure—both quantitatively and qualitatively—and wants to be reconciled with us. Which is precisely why God chose to come in the flesh in the form of his Son Jesus. To provide a way forward. To guide us to a new and better future. One that we can work toward here and now. Even if only a mere foretaste, a pale imitation, of God’s vision for our future.

And despite it all, this is not the end. This is merely a blip in time before the promise of eternal life that Jesus came to usher in. That he came to proclaim through such signs as the changing of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana. That he came to accomplish through his death and resurrection. The promise of our eternal relationship with God—and with one another—characterized by unbounded love and grace. A relationship that is eternal and can be likened to a glorious banquet. And we are all invited.