

Sunday, January 19, 2025
Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

John 2.1-11

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1146712143798670>

(Sermon begins at about 21:10)

“I’ll Drink to That”

As we have discussed over the last several week, as we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany and then moved into Epiphanytide (the season after Epiphany) this is a time of intentionally looking at the various ways in which Jesus is revealed to the Gentiles. The most common manifestation is the visit of the Magi, which we celebrate on the Feast of the Epiphany. But there are two other stories that are equally significant as images of the Epiphany: the baptism of Jesus, which we celebrated last week, and Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, which we heard in today’s Gospel reading. While we generally commemorate both the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus every year, in two out of every three years we do not hear about the changing of water into wine. Which is sad. Not just because it is a fun story. But also, because it somehow implies this story is not as important as the others in revealing who Jesus is.

The visit of the Magi is significant because it is the quintessential revelation of who Jesus is to Gentiles, to non-Jews. Symbolizing that Jesus is Messiah for ALL people. The baptism of Jesus is significant because baptism is the sacramental act of repenting and turning our lives around to live in accordance with God’s laws. The fact that Jesus, who did not need to turn his life around, is nonetheless baptized is a sign of his solidarity with us; that no matter what we experience in our lives, Jesus is there for us and with us. But what does a miracle of changing water into wine have to say about who Jesus is, other than that he likes to party? What does this have to say about who he is for us, as our Messiah?

To set the stage, it is important to note that, in his Gospel, John organizes the story of Jesus’ ministry around seven miracles. John calls these miracles “signs.” And for good reason. Each miracle is a sign, like a road sign, pointing to who Jesus is. Pointing to some significant quality or characteristic that, taken together, portray a more detailed picture of who Jesus is, what his ministry is about, and who we are as his followers. The changing of water into wine is the first of these signs. Like many firsts in a series of events, this particular sign sets the tone for what is to come. This sign is meant to introduce the major theme which all the others will further expand upon. Culminating with what, while not termed a sign, proves to be the eighth and final sign. The sign around which our entire faith is centered: Christ’s resurrection.

Now, a word of caution about signs: one that actually is a running theme throughout John’s Gospel. Sometimes it is easy to get caught up in the performance of a miracle and miss its true purpose, to miss what the sign truly points to. Some have likened this to driving along a road heading toward a particular destination. Along the way, you see a sign pointing to that destination. You stop, get out and look at the sign, ooh and ahh over it, rather than continuing

on to the actual destination. Kind of misses the point. The sign is not the thing itself. Stopping at a sign directing the way to the Grand Canyon is hardly the same as actually seeing the Grand Canyon in all its majestic beauty and wonder. John's intent is for us to not stop at the sign, but to do the work of continuing on to the intended destination. As I said, this is a running theme throughout John's Gospel, with Jesus chastising the crowds and even his own disciples for getting hung up on the signs and missing the true and intended message.

So, what is the "destination" to which the changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana actually points? It helps to look at the context of the story to develop a map. Mere days after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, we find Jesus, his mother, and his disciples attending a wedding in Cana. John's Gospel does not have Jesus whisked away from his baptism to spend forty days being tempted in the wilderness. Instead, he gets right to work, calling disciples and then immediately moving on to the wedding scene. So, this is effectively the beginning of his public ministry.

As we hear, Jesus' mother Mary is concerned that they have run out of wine. Now the question becomes, why would she even care? Perhaps she wants a drink. But more likely, her concern indicates that either the bride or the groom is a relative, and that Mary is concerned with family honor. Weddings in that time and culture were a huge deal, with weddings being a lengthy affair, often lasting a week. Wine was a critical component of the festivities, serving as a symbol of the joy of the occasion, but also wine was considered an essential sign of hospitality. Running out would have been a major social faux pas, causing embarrassment and shame for the host family.

The fact that the wine ran out could also have said something about the status of the family and their guests. While wealthy families could provide all the wine needed for the festivities, those who were not so fortunate often relied on guests to bring wine to contribute to the party. Running out perhaps further adding to the embarrassment because of perceived social or economic status.

While Mary is concerned, Jesus is obviously not. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" Although his follow-up comment of "My hour has not yet come" is a bit cryptic. Perhaps indicating that he does not feel the time is right to tip his hand, to perform a miracle and reveal who he truly is. Although Mary persists, even if only in a subtle way, saying to the servants "Do whatever he tells you." I don't know about you, but if my mother says something like that, you know she's not going to let it go. Best to give in, because if Mom makes a request, it must be important to her.

In persisting, Mary seems to have some deeper insight as to how this could play out. She seems to know what Jesus is capable of. And probably knowing Jesus better than anyone else does, she seems to know that Jesus' compassion will shine through, resulting in him ultimately relenting and taking action. We don't know why Jesus changes his mind and chooses to act, but that's exactly what happens. Perhaps because Mom asked. Perhaps because he realized that now was as good a time as any to reveal who he is, in a safe place among family and friends. Perhaps because he realizes his actions here might serve as a good image for what his life and

ministry are all about. So, he has the servants fill the nearby stone jars with water. The next thing you know, we have wine.

Now, six jars holding twenty to thirty gallons of water is a lot of wine. As much as 180 gallons. That should be enough to get them through the rest of the festivities, and probably then some. The sheer amount intended to be a sign, an indication, of what Jesus' life and ministry would be about: extravagance. The extravagance of his compassion. The extravagance of his grace. The extravagance of his love.

But the extravagance is not just in the amount. It's also in the quality. "When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from . . . the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, '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.'" Indicating that what Jesus offers by way of his compassion, his grace, and his love is not ordinary, is not for show, but is the best he has to offer. And then some.

The sign to which the changing of water into wine points is extravagance, in all respects—quantity and quality—of what Jesus offers us. Ultimately demonstrated through his willingness to suffer and die for us. Ultimately demonstrated through his eighth and final sign, his resurrection, in which he breaks the bonds sin and death have on humanity, providing us with forgiveness of our sins and the promise of new and eternal life in and through him. The ultimate in extravagance. Accomplishing something that had never been done before. All as a sign of his love and compassion for his beloved children. This is the ultimate purpose of his ministry; of his very life. Certainly, in keeping with a statement Jesus makes later in John's Gospel: "I came that they may have life; and have it abundantly" (Jn 10.10).

Despite the extravagance of the changing water into wine, Jesus does not make a big show of it. It is very subtle and understated. He merely has the servants fill the stone jars with water and he quietly does the rest. No fanfare. And when the steward goes to the bridegroom with his observations about the fantastic quality of the wine, Jesus just lets it remain a mystery. He does not jump up and down and shout, "It was me! I did that!" Again, saying something about this extravagant gift. Jesus offers it quietly, unpretentiously, matter-of-factly. Almost as if a normal, everyday occurrence. Which, for Jesus, it was. Offering the best of himself unobtrusively to whoever was willing to accept the gift.

Another significant component of intended meaning of this first sign is also indicated by the location, the context, in which it was performed. It is performed at a wedding. A wedding being a new beginning. The start of a new life for the bride and groom. Performing his first sign at a wedding is an appropriate venue in two respects. First is the fact that this is the beginning of a new life, or at least a new phase of life, for Jesus. In his baptism a few days before, he was anointed by God for his ministry as Messiah. Here, today, at that wedding, Jesus officially begins his public ministry. In performing this sign, he officially reveals himself, even if only to his mother, his disciples, and the servants working the wedding banquet. And second, as already noted, is that the extravagance of this sign ultimately points to the new life Jesus provides us through his death and resurrection. One image sometimes used for that new life in the

heavenly realm being “the marriage feast of the Lamb.” Truly a new beginning, a new life, for all.

While all the images of Epiphany are important and come together to reveal who Jesus is as the Messiah for all people, it is the lesser-celebrated account of Jesus performing his first miracle of changing water into wine at a family wedding that truly completes the picture. Demonstrating not just that Jesus came for all people. Demonstrating not just that Jesus came to be in solidarity with us. But also demonstrating that in doing so, he offers us a wildly extravagant gift. Offering us, insuring us, a new life filled with his love and compassion, filled with forgiveness and grace. Providing a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which we will all share with him. And all we have to do is be willing to accept the invitation, to show up, and to raise our glasses and say, “I’ll drink to that.”