

Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
John 2:1-11  
January 20, 2019

## Wedding Guests

Sometimes the passages of scripture appointed by the lectionary are so timely, they make the preacher's job a piece of cake. I recall the week when President Clinton's affair with a Whitehouse intern was breaking news. The first reading for the following Sunday was the story about King David and his affair with Bathsheba.

Lord George McLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland used to say, "If you think that's a coincidence, then I wish you a very dull life."

There are other occasions, however, when the lectionary beckons us to put down the newspaper, turn off the cell phone, close the cover on the laptop and sit for a few minutes with a passage of scripture. The pericope might not have immediate application to, say, the current government shutdown or the plight of unpaid federal workers, but if we sit with it for a while, a ray of divine light just might shine in the dark recesses of our headline-hungry hearts.

Oftentimes, resting in God's Word, our breathing deepens, our heartrate slows, our mind become less frenetic, and our anxiety level comes down a few clicks.

Perhaps today is one of those occasions. Today we are transported not to a march on Washington or a contentious press conference, but to a place called Cana in the region of Galilee – way up at the top of the nation we now call Israel, a few miles from Lake Galilee, about eight miles north of Nazareth, as the crow flies. A wedding feast is taking place, and the Gospel writer John has given us invitations to attend.

Cana is a small town, but to us this seems like a big wedding. The entire village is here, along with out-of-town guests, among them Jesus and his disciples. Now that we're here, perhaps I should mention that we'd be wise to pace ourselves, for wedding celebrations around here can last as long as a week. This is no stand-up affair with canopies and finger sandwiches. This is a proper wedding feast.

We're chatting with the other guests when Mary, the mother of Jesus, pulls him aside and whispers loud enough for us to overhear, "They've run out of wine." The clear implication is that Mary wants Jesus to do something about this imminent social catastrophe. *Out of wine when the party is at full swing. The family will never live this down.*

Jesus is surprisingly nonchalant. "What has that got to do with me? I know what you're thinking, Mother, but now is not the time or place. My hour has not yet come."

But Mary gives Jesus one of those mother looks. You know what I'm talking about. The look that conveys meaning without saying a word. The look that says, *If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.*

Mary turns to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus gets the message loud and clear. There are six large ceremonial jars nearby. He tells the servants to fill them all with water. After they have complied, he tells them to take a little of what's inside one of those jars to the head steward. The steward takes a studied sniff and then a careful sip.

Did you see the look on his face? He can't believe it. This is no two-buck Chuck. This is vintage stuff. The sommelier cannot contain his delight. He runs over to the bridegroom and blurts out, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the cheap stuff later, when the guests are all looped, but you – you have kept the good wine until now."

The steward walks away, shaking his head, passing those huge stone jars on his way back to the serving area -- 600 – 900 bottles worth of palate -pleasing wine. This is one wedding he'll never forget.

What a strange and wonderful story this is, and what a strange and wonderful way for the Gospel writer John to kick off his version of the Good News of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

John's Gospel, as you probably know, is the outlier amongst the four Gospels. Mathew, Mark, and Luke follow an almost-identical sequence and resemble one another closely, but John takes a different tact. His way of telling the story of who Jesus is and how God is present in him differs in significant ways.

For one thing, John appropriates terms from the philosophies and mystical religions of his day – terms like “light,” “darkness,” and “word” which have particular meanings. John uses these terms in new and imaginative ways to tell us who Jesus is.

Also, John never beats his readers over the head with his proclamation. Instead he invites us to witness conversations and encounters Jesus with all sorts of people in in in all sorts of unlikely scenarios. And, in many cases, the conversation takes place on several levels at the same time.

In John, we overhear a conversation with a foreign woman at a well. We sit in on a late-night chat between Jesus and Nicodemus, a scholar and Pharisee. And we become guests at a wedding where a miracle takes place, but hardly anyone notices.

In fact, John never uses the term “miracle” to describe the amazing things that happen when Jesus is around. He calls them “signs,” not “miracles.” They *point*, but they do not *prove*. John does not want us to become preoccupied with the event itself, but instead to open our eyes and ears to where this “sign” is pointing.

What might this morning's sign reveal? What might it tell us about who God is, and how God is present in the flesh of Jesus?

Or, to use John's terminology, how does this sign reveal God's glory?

A story like today's can be heard in a thousand different ways. In the end – just like the head steward -- we might walk away from this wedding scratching our heads and wondering what any of it might mean.

Let me suggest three words that might help.

The first word is **grace**. For John, the coming of the Word made flesh is the arrival of “**grace upon grace**.” The Jesus of the other three Gospels arrives with a call to repentance and the threat of judgment. He has a “winnowing fork” in his hand, ready to separate wheat from chaff. But this story is not about judgment. It’s about grace.

Jesus gives a gift, wholly undeserved, completely unexpected, and all but unnoticed, except by a few. It’s no accident that Jesus is at a wedding amongst other wedding guests. His gift of “good wine” is an endorsement of all the good things that make life rich and fully human: relationships, community, hospitality, sexuality, meals, family, joyful celebrations.

All of these are God’s gifts to us. It is fitting, therefore, that the first “sign” in John’s Gospel allows the celebration to continue. **Grace upon grace**.

The second word that emerges from this story is **abundance**.

What small-town wedding feast requires 600 – 900 bottles of wine? Over against the modern mind-set of *scarcity*, this story overflows with *abundance*. There is more than enough for everyone. This scene calls to mind the messianic banquet toward which the prophets Isaiah and Amos pointed. The doors of the banquet hall swing open. People come from east and west, from north and south. There is no limit to God’s love and welcome. **Abundance**.

The third word is **wonder**. There is no rational explanation provided in this story. Jesus doesn’t interrupt the festivities to tell everyone that they are in the presence of the Son of God. He doesn’t pontificate. He doesn’t call attention to himself. He doesn’t explain. He just lets the party go on and the wonder sink in for those who are paying attention.

I am aware that many people these days think of the church as a house of doctrine, the place where you have to assent to this or that teaching, follow the rules, and keep your questions to yourself. I wish the church were better at conveying the sheer wonder of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ and the unabashed joy of following him.

The missionary D. T. Niles once described Christianity as “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” That’s one way of putting it. Based on this story, I’d say that Christianity is more an invitation to **“taste and see that the Lord is good.”**

Taste the welcome of a community that does not judge you. Come to a table prepared for you by the one whose hands still bear the marks of costly love. Experience the wonder of God’s unmerited grace, the grace that saves “a wretch like me” and saves the best wine for last.

Sometimes you go home from a wedding with a goodie bag filled with favors. Grace. Abundance. Wonder. These are the favors you and I might take home from the wedding in Cana.

Frankly, I don’t think any of us will ever *understand* this story. But we can *experience* it. Right here. Right now. At this Table. Here is grace. Here is abundance. Here is wonder.

Before you pick up your cell phone and your laptop. Before you gird up your loins to fight the good fight, come to Cana. Come to the Table. Here you will find rest for your souls and food for the journey.