

January 16, 2022 - 2nd Sunday after Epiphany - Sermon notes

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

The Best is Yet To Come

Weddings are generally very enjoyable events and in them is a tremendous intersection of the various parts of a society. The story of the Wedding at Cana is probably one of the most well known stories of Jesus' ministry and the miracle of water being changed into wine has been used as an illustration in both appropriate and inappropriate ways. (I can think of some comedians who have intentionally misinterpreted the story in order to get a laugh) In John the apostle's mind this story was a way to help people become followers of Jesus by coming to believe that he is the Messiah and through believing have life in his name because that was his announced purpose for the entire book he wrote about Jesus. The details of the story concern something many of us have experienced - some kind of wedding feast so it is pretty easy to put ourselves in the middle of the story and take on the role of one of the participants. I sometimes find this exercise helpful in understanding what God wishes to say to me through the story so I invite you to share some thoughts with me as we look at the various characters in the story.

It seems that Mary, the mother of Jesus, notices something that needs attention. She is in attendance probably because she knows the families of the bride and/or the groom and wishes, like everyone else, for the party to be a time of great celebration. The fact that the festivities (which in the custom of that society may have gone on for days) have not ended as the wine is running out is not a recipe for the guests to think highly of the host and hostess. Mary's son has just returned to the area after his time away during which his ministry was launched through baptism and his temptation in the wilderness along with his first disciples. Knowing him to be a man of God's choosing, and perhaps remembering stories of the prophet Elijah and the jar of oil that did not empty, Mary seems to have come to the conclusion that Jesus could do something about this problem she has noticed. While Jesus did not seem interested in helping she 'paved the way' by instructing the servants to follow Jesus' instructions. That the servants followed her orders suggests that she had some kind of status among the guests - perhaps she was a close relative of the bride and groom. After her maneuver she disappears from the story but her pivotal role helps to bring about the miracle. Our gifts and abilities can be offered for use by God in so many different ways and in Mary's case it was a kind of clearing the path for a miracle to occur by urging the servants to follow Jesus' rather strange instructions. If we identify with Mary in this story it may mean that our role in the work of God is in noticing things that seem to need attention, facilitating the steps needed to be taken and then stepping out of the way in order for things to happen. Mary did not know how Jesus would address the problem she was only confident that he could and would. I suspect she too was surprised at the method of the solution.

The servants are the next point of focus. Alongside their other duties that evening they are asked to be sure that the large stone jars used for a purification ritual were filled to the brim with water. That being done they were to then draw off some water and give it to the steward in charge of the ceremony for his inspection. There may have been some whispering and complaining about the strangeness of the request or the servants might have simply shrugged their shoulders and rolled their eyes regarding the questionable sanity of some people. I imagine their surprise when the clean water they put into the stone jars became rich red wine. They knew they had done nothing to bring this change about and they might not have been able to imagine how the innocent looking guest managed it but it was clear that Jesus was the initiator of this wonder. We are told that through this action on Jesus' part his disciples believed in him and I imagine the servants who took part in the action looked upon Jesus in a completely different way for the rest of the party. There is no evidence in the story that they told the steward what had actually happened and so a large number of people remained unaware of the astounding events but they probably appreciated the results. When God's glory is revealed in our regular lives we often discover that the good things we were experiencing pale in comparison with what God is able to do with ordinary things. As good as the first wine served may have been the wine created by Jesus from the water was outstanding. These servants, who probably had served at other weddings when the poorer wine was served last, saw the way in which God does things and 'the best is yet to come' is part of that pattern. If we identify with the servants it may mean that our role in the work of God is to simply do what is being asked of us even when we 'question the sanity of those making the request'. As someone who is, from time to time, asked to do things on behalf of someone else I can completely identify with this aspect of the story. Following orders without comment is a discipline I have had to learn and by doing so I have been witness to God's wonders on more than one occasion.

The disciples of Jesus are also attending this celebration and, it would seem, they were witnesses to the drama. This event was among the first events shared by Jesus and the disciples according to John's account. Earlier in the story John the Baptist had identified Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' and on the strength of that testimony and some other things Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip and Nathaniel had become followers of this wandering preacher. The event which took place in Cana of Galilee opened their eyes even more to the reality of what it meant to be following 'the Lamb of God' and we are told that 'his disciples believed in him'. As a disciple of Jesus in this century I can resonate with those early disciples. I came to faith as a young man (teenager) for a variety of reasons and have followed Jesus as his disciple for many years. There have been a number of significant events which have increased my understanding of who Jesus really is and I have come away from those events believing even more strongly that he is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. Among all the other events that John chose to share with his readers this one is set as the

‘first of his signs’ and it ‘revealed his glory’ and so the disciples believed in him. As I reflect on this event my mind goes back to times in my own life where Jesus revealed his glory through what appeared at first to be a normal event. I recall, for instance, an evening with some teenagers at a Christian retreat. I had participated in many of these kind of events and, while they were always pretty special, this time a sense of profound unity galvanized the group in a way I had never seen before. That moment remains a clear memory in my mind and continues to assure me of the real identity of Jesus the Messiah. If we identify with the disciples it may mean that our role in the work of God is to place ourselves at the side of Jesus and participate in his life and ministry with open eyes and an open mind and a believing heart.

The steward who receives the water made into wine is the last person I will draw attention to in this reflection. He was probably aware of the impending shortage of wine and may have even constructed some plans to address the shortage. Clearly what was not in his plan was to acquire such high quality wine for the ending of the party. I find it somewhat surprising that he didn’t ask the servants where they had been hiding this great wine but it would seem that going straight to the host was the more appropriate response in this case. I wonder what he did when the host stared at him with that blank stare we all have when someone says something about which we know nothing. The steward left that party with a new idea about how to manage wine and that idea came because of the influence of God’s life in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The steward might have been congratulated for his daring departure from the norm and thereby received praise for something in which he had no control. If we identify with the steward it may mean that our role in the work of God will result in congratulations for things that were God’s doing and not ours and it will surprise us and cause us to re-think the way things have always been and open our minds to a different way. Perhaps the custom of bringing out the finest champagne at the end of the night began this way. The best is yet to come

A fairly ordinary event, like a wedding, or like a Church service, can be an occasion for the revelation of God’s glory. It can even happen in the quietness of a bedroom as attested by many who have come to saving faith in Jesus while kneeling at their bedside. May this reflection on the readings alongside the words provided in the attached liturgy be a vehicle through which the glory of God impact us as we share in this act of worship. And remember, the best is yet to come.

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