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Weekend of Sunday, January 20, 2019
2nd Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 2/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: John 2:1-11
Sermon Title: “Recognizing the Good Stuff”

Theme

Turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana is described as the first of Jesus’ signs. Through many such epiphanies, Jesus reveals that he bears God’s creative power and joyful presence into the world.

Text

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and 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.” ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sermon

A story is told of a Bible Study for preachers that was focused on just this reading. Among those present were a Methodist preacher, a Lutheran preacher, and an Episcopalian preacher. Noting that the six stone jars in the story could have held as much as 180 gallons of wine, the Methodist preacher said, "Wow! That is a lot of wine!" The Lutheran preacher thought for a moment and said, "No, that sounds just about right." The Episcopalian preacher said without a moment's thought, "We would have to order in more!"

Whether we appreciate it or not, one of the characteristics of the lectionary, that yearlong cycle of readings that take us along the journey of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus, is that we move along pretty rapidly all the while celebrating those great festivals we simply cannot live without, like Christmas and Easter.

But what can be perplexing is the pace of the journey. For example it was only 25 days ago that we were celebrating Christmas – there are still several houses on my trip into work that are decorated with lights and images of Santa Claus! And yet last week we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord, where the adult Jesus was baptized, and today we have the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. And while this is supposed to be the lectionary year of Luke, the reading for today is from John. To quote Nancy Grace, "What is going on?"

Well, this story is arguably considered the initiation of Jesus' public ministry. He was baptized by John the Baptizer, and then selected at least four of his disciples if not all of them (in John's gospel it is unclear). And right after that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus and his disciples, however many of them there were, went to a wedding in the little no account town of Cana, some nine miles north of Nazareth, the town Jesus called home. Cana is only mentioned in the gospel of John and then only a couple of times, so it was a rather inauspicious place to kick off a new thing, and maybe that was what was on Jesus' mind when his mother came to him with a problem. The problem was of course that the wedding feast was running out of wine.

Here let me tell you that in this day and culture, weddings were the responsibility of the groom's family. Women were seen as little more than the property of men. Daughters were the property of their fathers to sell to the highest bidder. I am sure

good fathers tried to sell their daughters to men they thought would be good husbands for their daughters, but don't fool yourselves, the exchange of wealth was a key factor. And then having acquired a bride for their son, the family provided a weeklong celebration where everyone was invited and the food and wine flowed freely, because the grandeur of the party, you see, was a statement about the status of the groom's family.

Do you see a problem? The wine ran out! What did this problem say about the groom's family!?!

Notice that it was Mary, not Jesus who noticed the problem. Something we don't often think about is that Mary had other children after Jesus and since Jesus is about 30 when this story takes place, it is likely that some of Mary's younger children had been married off. Therefore Mary would be sympathetic to a friend's problem – "Jesus, you have to do something about this situation."

There seemed to be some divine reluctance expressed by Jesus. Was this how he wanted to initiate his public ministry? Of all the signs and miracles he would have wanted to be remembered for, was this to be his first? But like a good son, Jesus acquiesced and did what his mother wanted him to do and that is where the story begins to get interesting.

John is the shortest of the four gospels. John is efficient and to the point without a lot of detail, but in this story he took the time to tell us details like, the presence of several large water jars sitting nearby. We should wonder why he does this.

There were six of them and they were stone (I suspect what he means is they were some kind of stoneware) and each held about 20 or 30 gallons. John told us that they were for the Jewish ritual of purification. Some Jews were having a big party; that is a lot of religiously obedient people washing their hands before eating, etc. That will take a lot of water – as much as 180 gallons! It isn't clear how many days the party had been going on but we can surmise for a long time since the wine ran out. The merrymakers must have washed their hands and washed them often because the jars were pretty much empty.

Jesus chose these vessels to be part of his first miracle. Why? What is the significance of what is going on here? I am so glad you asked.

I think Jesus used these empty jars because for him they are signs of an old dry empty religion, one that lacks vitality and vigor. He asked that the jars be filled with water and they were filled indeed. John noted that they are “filled to the brim.” Then without doing another thing he asked that some of the what? Water or wine be drawn out? We aren’t sure, are we? Some of whatever was in the jars was drawn out and taken to the steward. He tasted it and was surprised because the bridegroom had apparently broken with tradition and done a new thing – the wine had gotten better as the party had gone on!

I have entitled this sermon, “Recognizing the Good Stuff” not because the wine steward recognized it, but because too many times I don’t think we do, I’m not even sure we can.

I’m not a wine connoisseur but one who is can tell the difference between good wine and cheap wine. Obviously the wine steward in the story could tell the difference – don’t you imagine the wine that Jesus made was the best ever?

The Jews had been waiting and watching for the messiah for hundreds of years. Jesus was at the threshold of his public ministry. From this point on he would go out and perform important and significant signs and miracles, teach important lessons about the true nature of God and how faithful people should act, but will they recognize the good stuff?

You and I know enough about scripture to know that they don’t. Jesus was not what they expected and so they dismissed him.

Have you ever shopped for wine? Winemakers aren’t stupid. They label their wines with all kinds of crazy names and seductive labels to grab our attention because they know that is usually enough to get us to buy it. Beer brewers do the same thing and I admit that I can be seduced by a creative label ... once. But then when the contents don’t live up to the labeling, I make a mental note and try not to make that mistake again.

The messiah the Jews expected and wanted would be labeled, I mean marketed, I mean would be a charismatic, political, military leader. That is someone they could rally behind, someone they would be proud to have lead them.

But Jesus, he turned water into wine at a wedding party in Cana, ... (yawn) who cares? He would go on to do more important things like healing and raising the dead to new life and that was all well and good but it wasn't really what they wanted.

I submit to you that they really couldn't recognize the good stuff. In fact I will take it a little farther, they wanted to be seduced by the fulfillment of their own ideals – and Jesus just wasn't it.

The empty water jars were symbols of everything that is wrong with religion, theirs in that day and maybe ours in our day (I'll leave that to you to discern). They had been obedient to all that ritual washing but then what does Jesus do? He used their empty religious vessels to do a new thing.

You see, their religion was empty and dry and dying but Jesus gave new vitality to their pursuit of God. He turned water into wine and the party that was destined to fizzle out was given new life. This little sign turned out to be a metaphor for everything that was to follow!

I have a question for you. When did the miracle actually take place? What is in those water jars after they were filled with water? It may surprise you to find out that I think the jars were still filled with ... water – until the water is poured out and tasted in faith. You see, faith in action is what makes all the difference.

The steward expected to taste wine; no one would take water to a steward for tasting. And what did he taste, but the best wine he had ever tasted.

This story is a great metaphor for a life of faith and for life in the church. If you see a life of holy living as a dreary existence based on keeping laws and fearing the results of what happens when you don't, then all you will have may be clean hands from all that ritual washing, but you will go thirsty and miss quite a party. But if you really want to experience the full, to the brim and overflowing abundant life that Jesus initiates then you need to drink up in faith because the party that Jesus hosts is the best and long-lasting.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Ask yourself, "Do I want to enjoy life? I mean really enjoy life?" I have a suggestion that I think you will like.

Rather than embrace your religious/spiritual life, whatever that might be for you, embrace the one you call Lord of your life. Because Jesus Christ, not a bunch of spiritual disciplines (as much as I love them) is the one who saves the party from disaster by offering us grace overflowing to be enjoyed in faith. The Christian life is to be poured out and enjoyed and shared, not kept inside old stone jars or plaster walls. Let this story be affirmation to those of you who want to live, and live abundantly.

Prayer

Loving Jesus, forgive us for the many times that we reduce our Christian faith to a series of ritual actions. Remind us that the spiritual life, the life of discipleship, can be a party, and that you are the life of that party. Lord, let us taste and see that you are the good stuff. We pray this in your name. Amen