

Saving the best for last

John 2:1-12

January 21, 2007

I have always thought this a rather strange story. John tells the story of Jesus in attendance at a wedding. The supply of wine on hand for the celebration is exhausted, so Jesus performs a miracle, turning water into wine.

OK. We're impressed. But what's the point? That you should be sure to invite Jesus to your next party? Well, yes! Something like that. But I'll say more about that later.

The story seems out of character for Jesus. He performs a miracle, but the miracle seems to serve no clear purpose, at least no clear redemptive purpose. No one is healed. No one is forgiven. No one is provided an opportunity to turn their life around. It is hard to see how this story advances the cause of the kingdom of God, how it reveals anything about the grace and truth Jesus brings to humanity.

So Jesus reluctantly uses his powers to solve a domestic crisis, to keep the wine flowing. So what? Why does John choose to retell this story -- it appears in none of the other gospels -- and why does John include it here at this important point, at the very beginning of the story of Jesus' public ministry?

The gospel of John as a whole is rather different from the other three. It is the favorite of many people, but not my favorite. There are stories found only in John's gospel that I do especially like -- the story of Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman by a well (John 4); the story of Jesus healing a blind man (John 9); the story of Jesus meeting his disciples on the beach after his resurrection (John 21) -- but I am often put off by the style and language of John's gospel.

The Jesus of Matthew and Mark and Luke seems reluctant to talk about himself, but John's Jesus talks about himself all the time.

The Jesus of the synoptic gospels speaks in parables, in indirect fashion, inviting the hearer into the conversation, inviting the inquirer to think about who he is and what he has come to do, but John's Jesus speaks openly, directly declaring who he is.

The one Jesus seems always on the move, restless, engaged in the business of the kingdom, while John's Jesus seems to talk more than act, suspended in a timeless conversation.

The Jesus of Matthew and Mark and Luke seems more human, more real, while the Jesus of John's gospel is more mystical, more philosophical.

All of which is exactly why I chose to use John as the focus of our worship services this spring! We need to venture out of our comfort zones. I need to venture out of my comfort zone. That is often where we have the most to learn, and when we grow the most. We do not grow much only repeating what we already know and staying well within the confines of the worship styles or Bible texts or church traditions with which we are most comfortable. So we will look at John's gospel together, and, I trust, we will learn something together!

To be fair, we must approach the gospel on its own terms, be clear about the context it sets for itself, and that context is this:

In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh.

John's gospel casts Jesus as Word, not as Wonder Worker, not as Miracle Man, but as Word. We need to hear the gospel in those terms, meeting Jesus as the Revealer, as one who is the embodiment of God's self-revelation, as one who will tell us -- and show us -- who God is. And we may expect that the speech and the actions of a Jesus who is Word will likely carry symbolic meanings, meanings deeper than what may be apparent on the surface, every word, every action, intended to communicate something of who God is.

With that context in mind, let's take a look at the story of the wedding in Cana. Jesus, and his mother, and his disciples, are invited to a wedding. We aren't told whose wedding it is or why Jesus was invited. We are only told they are there. The fact that it is a wedding is not essential to the story, but it is nice to know that Jesus readily participated in the social festivities of his day.

While they are at the wedding, the wine gives out. At this point in the story, John relates a most interesting conversation between Jesus and his mother ...

Mother: They are out of wine.

Jesus: You must not tell me what to do. My time has not yet come.

Mother (to servants): Do whatever he tells you.

She wasn't going to take "No" for an answer!

This brief dialogue raises all kinds of questions. Why does Jesus' mother speak to him about the problem with the wine? Does she think he can do something about it? What does she know about him? What does she believe about him? Why does Jesus rebuff her? Why is he reluctant to do anything about the wine? And why does he decide to do something after all?

The dialogue raises all kinds of interesting questions, all of which are left unanswered, because they have nothing to do with the point of John's story. The point is the miracle itself, and the meaning of the miracle, specifically, its meaning to Jesus' disciples. The water drawn from the stone jars turns out to be wine, but the miracle gets no public attention, it is done simply and quietly. John does not focus on any impression Jesus makes on the crowd. It's the bridegroom who gets all the attention and all the credit! The focus is on what they, the disciples of Jesus, see in Jesus. The focus is on what we, the disciples of Jesus, see in Jesus.

And what do they see? What can we see? Glory!

They saw Jesus' glory and they believed! They saw the glory of God's generosity, the glory of God's blessings given liberally and abundantly and freely to men and women. Do the math! Six stone jars each with a capacity of twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus provided somewhere between 120-180 gallons of wine! That's a lot of wine!

Wine is a symbol of joy, of joyful times, of times of great celebration, and the wine God gives, the wine Jesus provides, is nothing but the best! Jesus reveals a God who fills our lives with good things, who fills our lives with the best of things, who fills our lives with joy and blessing.

Some have even seen the wine as a symbol of the messianic banquet, the great feast to come, when God's blessing of creation and of all living things that fill it will be full and complete. In any case, the miracle of the wine was a sign to the disciples then, and a sign to Jesus' disciples now, of the kind of God Jesus comes to reveal -- a generous God, a God who shares our joy and brings us joy in abundance, a God who saves the best for last!

But there's more. Think of what Jesus did with ordinary water. Think of what Jesus made of ordinary water -- the finest of wines! Think of what Jesus can do with you! Think of what Jesus can make of ordinary you! Something fine! Something good! Something extraordinary!

The miracle of the wine was a sign to the disciples then, and a sign to us, of what Jesus can and will do with us -- transforming us, with our ordinary bodies and our mundane souls, into creatures of extraordinary beauty and grace.

So, you see, the point of John's story is not exactly that you should be sure to invite Jesus to your next party, but that Jesus wants to invite you to his next party! And, oh, what a party it will be! You're all invited. Everybody is invited. And there will be enough, more than enough, for everybody to share. More than enough wine, more than enough blessing, more than enough joy.

The best is yet to come! God's best is yet to come! The best is yet to come for you, whether you are twelve or eighty-two. The best is yet to come for your church, whether it's been around for two years or one hundred and fifty years. Jesus is saving the best for last!