

The Good Stuff

John 2:1-11

The lectionary this year takes us into the gospel of Luke, for the most part, but today, for the second Sunday in Ordinary time, or the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear from John a story of revelation, a story about discovering who Jesus is.

The account of the wedding at Cana comes right after the calling of the disciples, and I use that term loosely because in John, Jesus doesn't really call disciples, he just acquires them. John points Jesus out to his disciples, and a couple of them approach him to ask where he is staying: "Come and see," he says. And they do. Then Phillip finds Nathanael and tells him that they have found the messiah, a fellow from Nazareth, and when Nathanael skeptically wonders if anything good can come from Nazareth, Phillip says to him, "Come and see." And he does. He sees a man who sees him, seems to know him. Jesus tells him that he will see even more amazing things than that.

And indeed he does.

John tells us that on the third day, certainly words that have meaning in the gospels, Jesus and his brand-new disciples go to a wedding. Jesus' mother is there, too, and at some point she makes an important observation. The wine gave out. Like a toddler gives out after a morning of shopping. It's gone, spent. Nothing left. The party is about to end and the host will be disgraced. And that was a big deal. Weddings were 7-day affairs in that culture, a week-long celebration for the family and the community. To run out of wine would mean the end of the party, the end of the festivities.

So she pulls Jesus aside to tell him: they have run out of wine. And his response is puzzling, troubling: "woman; what concern is it to you or me," or worse, those words could be interpreted, "what do you and I have in common?" Clearly not the way a Jewish son would speak to his mother. I appreciate the observation of one commentator who said that it was more helpful to understand them as distancing words, not disrespectful words, and that they were probably meant to be interpreted post-resurrection, and Jesus' next comment certainly validates that thought: "my hour has not yet come." He will say that several times over the course of the gospel, and when his time does come, it is time for him to be crucified.

But then inexplicably, despite all of his protestations, Jesus then goes to work and has servants bring him the large, empty jars standing in the corner. Six of them, each large enough to hold about 20-30 gallons. At his command they are filled with water, and when the water is dipped out, it is no longer water. It is wine. The good stuff. Lots and lots of it.

And the party goes on.

A rather frivolous miracle? A bit showy? Maybe even scandalous? Maybe, I suppose, if you just take it at face value, but not much Jesus did was meant to be taken at face value.

This is a miracle about what happens when things give out. It is a miracle about what happens to empty, dry vessels.

The empty, dry vessels in this story were for religious purposes. They were for washing, purifying one's self before God. And sure, maybe they were empty because they weren't being used right then, but I have a suspicion that John meant they were empty symbolically, too. People still used them, but didn't give a whole lot of thought about what they were doing. They

were going through the motions. It was just one of the many things that their religion required of them. Maybe it's not so different from those shiny brass plates down there that we sometimes slip and call the "collection" plates, instead of "offering" plates, a dead giveaway that we sometimes think of it as our dues, our fair share to get the bills paid, not as a sign of our gratitude and trust in God; or these robes, which were supposed to do nothing more than cover us up so that you weren't distracted by our either poor or fancy clothes, and could hear the word of God, but have come to just be ceremonial garb, a sign of formality.

Their religion had given out. It had run dry. I wonder if that's part of the point that some of the people are making when they say that they are spiritual, but not religious, or that they have lost faith in organized religion. I wonder if they are telling us that the church has dried up, or is in danger of drying up. That we are more about **doing** church than **being** the Church. That much of what we do has lost its meaning, and maybe even become a burden to some. The higher church seems to be more about making policy and fighting than about mission, at least if you listen to the news. The local church has gotten caught up in the numbers game, doing whatever we think will get new people in the doors, and clinging to traditions and doctrines like they are our life's blood, forgetting that the love of Jesus is our life's blood. Our worship isn't always worshipful – we go through the motions of singing and praying and reciting without paying attention to what we are saying or promising or asking or confessing. We come unprepared and we leave unchanged. We are not moved by our worship, or by God's presence and grace.

But if all that is true, that isn't the worst of it. We've lost the only thing we have to give. We don't exist to provide the kids something to do mid-week, or as an outlet for people with musical abilities or to be a ready-made support group. We are here to offer hope and life and peace. The love and presence of God. That's our reason for being. And if we've gone dry as the body of Christ, what have we got to offer people out there who are empty, hurting, lost; people who have a great, gaping void in their lives? What do we have to give to people reeling from the devastation of an earthquake, people who have lost a loved one, or work, or a life-long dream? What do we have to offer someone who is overwhelmed by stress or loneliness? What have we got to offer each other besides a casserole and a kindly word of encouragement?

If there is anything scandalous about this story, it isn't the way Jesus spoke to his mother, or the fact he made wine. It's that he made so darned much of it. Jesus spent so much time talking about suffering and taking up crosses that he's got us convinced that being his disciple is really a burden. It's a sorrowful, heavy life that is full of trials and tribulations that must be borne up bravely, endured faithfully. The Christian life is about denying oneself and soldiering on; suffering, if not from life's circumstances and God's trials and tests, then certainly from living a life of self-sacrifice and avoiding the pleasures and temptations of the world.

But here Jesus comes along and the very first thing that he does is a miracle that is full of life and vitality and joy. He fills dry, empty vessels with gallons and gallons of the good stuff, so that the party doesn't have to end. A more-than-subtle hint about the sort of life God intends for us. In fact, throughout scripture feasting on sumptuous foods and indulging in fine wines have been used to symbolize the life that God intends for us. The great feast of the kingdom of God. The abundant life. A full, joyous life. A life of anything but suffering and dullness and emptiness.

The religious life wasn't meant to weigh us down, be lifeless and burdensome; drudgery; nothing more than heavy cross-bearing, an obligation that must be met to satisfy a demanding God. Not the institutional religion part, not the individual practice of it. This should be a place of celebration. A place where the party never ends, because there is never any fear of running out of love and grace and hope. God's love and presence will always be enough for us, when the

week has been bad, or dreams have been crushed, or a friend has been lost. And there is plenty left over to share; with someone who is waiting for news from Haiti, someone who is waiting to see if there will still be a job next month. There will always be enough, because each week we hear and proclaim the good news again. We'll never run dry.

John doesn't call what happened at the wedding of Cana a miracle. He calls it a sign, something to grab people's attention, to show them who Jesus is, and bring them to faith. And it did. The disciples saw what Jesus did, understood who he was, and they believed in him.

But for those of us who already believe, John's signs might serve to ask us a clarifying question: who do you believe in? A Christ who demands, who is all about suffering and heavy burdens, or a Christ who came to fill us with good things, the good stuff? A God who replaces empty, dry, meaningless voids with joy and life abundant?