

Sweet Excess

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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Texts: Isaiah 62.1-5;
 Psalm 36.5-10;
 1 Corinthians 12.1-11;
 John 2.1-11

Each of the gospels in their opening pages, tell us about the ministry of John the Baptist. He fits many of the stereotypes that live in our collective imagination for what a holy man of God would be like. He goes off to the desert. He gives up strong drink and material things and social connections. He is serious, his message is sharp, and his expectations are demanding. Jesus on the other hand is presented in John's gospel as taking his disciples days after they have agreed to follow him not to the desert but to a wedding. And not just to a wedding ceremony but to a wedding party where the wine has flowed so freely that it has run out before the party was even over. For those who think of holiness as being connected to restraint and sobriety it's a rather puzzling choice on Jesus' part.

That's actually part of what I appreciate about this story is the way it violates those kinds of definitions and expectations. Even if we have rejected those ways of thinking about holiness as being primarily about self-denial and restraint, there is still a powerful influence in western culture that does impact our sensibilities, especially our religious sensibilities. I am talking about the Greek ways of thinking about the mind and body that not only separates the one from the other but elevates the mind over the body. Jesus was not Greek. He was Jewish and Jews don't carry around this mind - body split. It is from the Jewish faith that we learn that this world in all its physicality was created by God and declared good. Human life is life in the flesh. We touch, we taste, we see, we feel. We were created for this world. As we talked about in Advent, the incarnation itself is an affirmation of human life in this material world. Even in his ministry, Jesus does not separate himself from life in all its fullness in the way that John the Baptist does. His presence at a wedding where family and friends gather to celebrate with wine that flows freely is a fitting place for Jesus

and his disciples to be.

As is true for the gospel of John from beginning to end, there is much more going on in this text than is found on the surface of the story. His gospel is filled with symbols and allusions, metaphor and mystery. This story of the wedding at Cana is not an exception. There are all kinds of layers on which to interpret this text. The readers of it would have recognized the significance of the setting. A feast in the Old Testament was understood to be a metaphor for the kingdom of God being fulfilled. The hope is that when creation is perfected and God's glory is fully revealed we will all gather for a feast at a table that is overflowing with abundance.¹ (You can't get much more abundant than 180 gallons of wine for one wedding.) The significance of the wine itself connects to another piece of Old Testament scripture. In the book of Proverbs those who pursue wisdom drink of wisdom's wine.² Both in John's prologue and here in this story John intends for us to see that Jesus is Wisdom incarnate. If we will come and receive it, the wine that Wisdom will provide is far more abundant than the ancient rituals of purification could ever hope to provide.

So if this story is told by John to reveal who Jesus is and the nature of his ministry, what should we take from it? The first truth we are to grab hold of from this text is that the kingdom of God is an extravagant place. It's a place where grace flows freely even in the face of sin and human failure. Jesus will demonstrate this truth throughout his ministry in ways that will offend the people around him. It's a place of feasting and celebration that gives joy to the soul and meaning to human life. This is not the last party or dinner Jesus will attend with friends. It's a place of profound generosity that will challenge those of us who receive it because it sets a forth a way of life that is so foreign to all of our stingy, calculating, anxious ways.

The disciples understood the promise inherent in this first of Jesus' signs. The glory of Jesus that is revealed here has much more to do with the promise that he will usher in this kingdom of God than it does with the miraculous way in which the water was turned to wine. This text pushes us in a couple of directions: one is to invite us to consider whether we really trust the wisdom that comes to us from the life and ministry of Jesus

¹ See passages like Isaiah 25.6.

² See Proverbs 9.5. The Anchor Bible Commentary Series *The Gospel According to John I-XII* by Raymond E. Brown offers a thorough discussion of these connections to Old Testament imagery, pgs. 105-110.

Christ. Do we trust the extravagant abundance of the love and grace of God? (Or as someone said at our retreat yesterday morning....do we really, *really* trust.) Do we trust in the way that Jesus' mother trusted him in this story....telling the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do and then walking away knowing *without knowing* that Jesus would take care of things. Do we trust like that?

Do you trust enough to step out in faith without knowing precisely where that faith will take you? There are lots of moments in life that call for faith like that. If you are looking for work it takes that kind of faith to keep sending those resumes even though you have already sent hundreds that have gone unanswered. If you are looking for support as you grieve or struggle in some other way it takes that kind of faith to keep reaching out and asking for what you need. If you are looking for justice it takes that kind of faith to keep making noise, signing petitions, writing editorials and organizing boycotts. I was reminded on Friday that it took 381 days for the Montgomery bus boycotts to take effect. They just kept stepping out in faith knowing (without knowing how or when) that the truth and love of God was stronger and more abundant than the hate and suffering they were encountering. Part of what we have to resist in times like those is the temptation to cave in on our disappointments and hold onto our fears thinking "Well, this is life. Just grin and bear it." When we get into that space we might privately pray for God to take our suffering but when will our asking become acting? That's why we organized this hygiene project today that our youth are working on for us to send to those suffering in Haiti. It may seem like very little in the face of overwhelming need but how can we simply pray for their suffering and not **do** something about it.

That is the second way our texts today press in on us. They invite us to see the role we have to play to use the gifts God has given us to us become instruments and conduits through which the abundance in God's kingdom flows. These wonderful passages we will read from 1 Corinthians this week and next do a wonderful job of opening us to that truth. We have a role to play and like the prophet from Isaiah we cannot keep silent in the face of suffering. After all, isn't that how God works? God will meet the need of the Haitian people as the world's compassion and generosity is poured out on them; bringing together all of these offerings big and small to offer hope and healing in the face of their unbelievable pain.

St. Augustine actually makes the point in his commentary on this text from John that the most notable miracle isn't the mysterious transformation of this water into wine at the wedding that day. What's really remarkable is that the same thing happens every year in vineyards. The water the clouds pour forth (the rain in those vineyards) is changed into wine every single year.³ We've lost our sense of wonder at the miraculous workings of creation and the profound abundance that is inherent in God's world. In the same way we've lost the sense of how God's glory is revealed through human souls at work in the flesh, in the world, in the stuff of daily living.

Irenaeus in the second century proclaimed that, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." That's what makes Jesus holy: the way he revealed what it looks like to be a human person fully alive. If we want to follow God in the way that Jesus did that is the question to keep coming back to. Am I fully alive? Is the abundance of God at work in me? And just as important is the question - am I living in a way that makes it possible for other people to be fully alive and to know the abundance of God? If the answer is no then the question becomes what are you going to do about it? And that is the question from which movements are born: the civil rights movement, Hope Is Ready, Room for All, Charter for Compassion.⁴ It doesn't matter how small or large the scale, it's about the commitment to look for and expect and make space for the glory of God to be revealed.

I want to close this morning with a blessing for all of you as you go about that work. It is a poem by Richard Wilbur that my mother read at Andrew's and my wedding. The poem is a wedding toast but it is based on this text from John. While we did have it read at our wedding, I don't believe that it is really about weddings but rather about life in the kingdom of God. So whether you are single or partnered, happy, lonely, contented or disillusioned, this blessing is for you. It is for all of us no matter where we find ourselves who seek to live in the kingdom of God.

³ Augustine *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Tractate VIII, Chapter II. 1-4.

⁴ Here are links to the last three movements mentioned above. Hope Is Ready: <http://www.facebook.com/people/Hope-Is-Ready/100000513360620>. Room for All: <http://roomforall.com/>. Charter for Compassion: <http://charterforcompassion.org/>.

St. John tells how, at Cana's Wedding feast,
The water-pots poured wine in such amount
That by his sober count
There were a hundred gallons at the least.

It made no earthly sense, unless to show
How whatsoever love elects to bless
Brims to a sweet excess
That can, without depletion, overflow.

Which is to say that what love sees is true;
That the world's fullness is not made but found.
Life hungers to abound
And pour its plenty out for such as you.

Now, if your loves will lend an ear to mine,
I toast you....⁵
May you not lack for water,
And may that water smack of Cana's wine.

⁵ This line in the poem reads "I toast you both, good son and dear daughter." Richard Wilbur, *A Wedding Toast* from Robert Hass and Stephen Mitchell, editors, *In the Garden: A Wedding Anthology*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 15.