

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“New Beginnings: The Life of the Party”

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Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

The party was dying. We had invited about 25 people over to our house to enjoy a delicious, 18 pound smoked brisket. My husband, Jason, had been up since four in the morning babysitting this hunk of meat, and we'd gathered together friends and neighbors and people we barely knew so that we would have enough folks to eat this enormous feast of smoked goodness.

Jason had told everyone to be there around 6 o'clock and to bring a side dish. People mingled and chatted for several hours while we waited for the meat to finish cooking to perfection. But by 8:30, the party was clearly dying. People were hungry. Kids were tired. And I had nothing to feed them.

Finally, someone kindly suggested we break into the side dishes. And some hot dogs turned up out of somewhere and we threw them on the grill. And, loaves and fishes style, there was somehow enough food to go around. The party was saved. And the brisket came off the grill at 10:30 that night.

Which is why I truly sympathize with the hosts of this wedding party in the gospel of John and truly appreciate the miracle Jesus performed there.

A proper Jewish wedding feast was supposed to last seven days. And horror of horrors, the host had run out of wine before the festivities were supposed to be over. This would have been the very height of hospitality failure, a major embarrassment with serious social consequences.

And the mother of Jesus, as she is known in the Gospel of John, seems to think Jesus can do something to help.

You know, I always wonder about what Jesus' mother thought, all that pondering in her heart, concerning what Jesus was capable of doing, what it meant for him to be the Son of God. There are some interesting non-Biblical texts that tell stories of Jesus as a child performing some rather exotic miracles. But according to John's gospel, this water-into-wine episode is the first of Jesus' signs or miracles. And it comes at the urging of this mother, who somehow knew this type of thing was in his wheelhouse.

Now, like much of the Gospel of John, this story is saturated with symbolic meaning.

First, we're told that this happened on the third day. On the one hand, we could hear this simply as chronological storytelling. The gospel says that on the first day of his ministry, Jesus called his first disciples. On the second day, he called Phillip and Nathaniel to follow him. And here we are on the third day.

But knowing how John's gospel is constructed, I'm more inclined to think we are supposed to draw the obvious parallel to the other "third day" in the larger narrative. Not only did Jesus resurrect a dying wedding party on this third day, he is inaugurating the resurrection of a whole people, the Jewish people, who were like empty jars, waiting to be filled to overflowing with that which makes for joy and celebration. These people were dried up from centuries of exile and oppression, occupation and subjugation. Prophets like Isaiah had talked about God's love and desire for Israel in terms of great endearment, as we heard in today's first reading. God rejoices in Israel and calls for celebration and praise, singing and dancing and feasting. This is what Jesus gives to the world in this sign. Not jars filled with wine to keep the dizzy crowd drunk and rowdy. But rather a faith overflowing with joy and goodness.

But as is also often the case in the gospel of John, not everybody in this story gets it. John's gospel is full of mystery. There are many episodes where people are left scratching their heads at what Jesus says and does. But there are always a few who understand.

In this story, there is the steward who assumes the fine wine came from some hidden reserves of the host. He's puzzled that the host would have saved the best wine for last, when the guests are too far gone to appreciate it. The sign, the miracle, the resurrection is lost on him.

Then there are the guests themselves, who we imagine happily guzzle down this miraculous gift without a clue as to its divine origins. The party went on for the prescribed seven days, and everyone went home, unchanged.

Imagine drinking wine that had been miraculously transformed from water by Jesus Christ himself, and never knowing it. Imagine perhaps even getting drunk and foolish on that wine, and never knowing the difference. What a waste!

But then there are the disciples, who have been following Jesus only a day or two. They don't really know who he is or even why they're following him. John the Baptist declared him to be "the Lamb of God," whatever that means. Andrew said he is the Messiah, but what does he know? Mostly, Jesus just says, "follow me," and "come and see." Except for his revelation to Nathanael that he has some kind of time and space warp vision that allowed him to see Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. But that's what it took to convince Nathanael that something good could come out of Nazareth. Jesus promised Nathanael would see greater things than that, and he delivers in this sign of turning water into wine.

The disciples know the source of the gift, the fine wine. They get to really see and experience the miracle. And because of that, they believe in Jesus. They are filled to overflowing like the jars of wine, they get a glimpse of the resurrection joy to come.

But why are the disciples privileged to witness this miracle and not any of the other guests?

Well, the disciples, unlike the average wedding guest, were following Jesus. They were hanging out around him. Watching his every move. They were expecting something to happen. They were looking for a sign. And they got what they were looking for.

Finally, there are the servants in this story. We don't hear too much about them. Were they Jewish? We don't know. Did they know anything about Jesus? Probably not. But we are told a couple of important things.

One, they did what Jesus told them to do. Household servants weren't necessarily required to take orders from just anybody. When Jesus' mother tells them to do whatever Jesus tells them, they could have said, "hold on just a minute, lady, let me go talk to the master about this." When Jesus tells them to fill six enormous jars of water used for the Jewish rite of purification, they could have said, "you know what? I'm just going to run this by the boss." That's a lot of water to lug around for no apparent reason. The purification rites happen before the wedding takes place, so there was no clear need for those jars to be filled. But the servants do what Jesus tells them to do, even though it is difficult, labor-intensive, and seemingly unnecessary. They give Jesus the authority of their master.

The second thing John's story makes very clear about these servants is that they knew where the wine came from. They saw and experienced the miracle of the water being turned into wine. In fact, they were bearers of that miracle themselves, taking water from the jars and serving wine to the steward. They were privileged the witness and to bear this miracle, not because they were following Jesus. Not because they were looking for a sign. Purely by grace were they able to witness this resurrecting miracle.

So the question that confronts us today is, where are God's miracles? Where are the signs? If Jesus can turn water into wine to save a wedding party, why doesn't he turn sand into AIDS treatment for people in Africa or rubble into food for starving Syrians? In the face of these obvious deficiencies, it is difficult to see God's abundant grace.

But this kind of thinking will lead us to be like the guests at the wedding. They had friends and family who were ill. They were living in a poor backwater town, part of a minority group surviving under the thumb of the Roman Empire. They saw need and they experienced tragedy. And for just a short time, for just seven days, they came together to celebrate the union of two people, the possibility of new life for their community. And even though they missed the miracle, they were still given this extended experience of joy and celebration. They got a reprieve from the realities of life and death, grief and struggle. But they missed the blessing of recognizing the hope for true life, abundant life, that was right there in their midst, right there on their lips.

If we are not looking for God's activity, we're likely to miss it. We may enjoy a reprieve from the struggles of life, the weight of tragedy, and the burden of sin from time to time. But instead of recognizing in those moments the love and grace of God, we will simply go on as we have, our lives unaltered, still waiting for the world to change without really expecting anything to happen.

Perhaps we could say that it isn't God's job to miraculously heal all the problems of the world in an instant. We are, after all, the hands and feet of Christ, the stewards of the earth, and there is much more we can and should do to help those in need. This is all true, all well and good, but do not forget that the steward, too, missed the miracle. And that is because he failed to do what the servants did. He was serving the wrong master.

If we place our authority in earthly leaders and governments and institutions, things will sometimes work out, but we will miss out on the miracle of it all. If we hold ourselves ultimately responsible for the life of the party, we may be left scratching our heads at the way things work out instead of believing in a gracious God and celebrating God's love and salvation.

If, instead, we live like the disciples, following Jesus, staying by his side, watching his every move, expecting the miraculous, we will not be disappointed. We will recognize God's hand in the resurrected party and the resurrected life.

But not everybody is ready to be a disciple. Some of us are still finding our way to Jesus, figuring out who he is and what we believe about him. We may have grown apathetic or disillusioned as we've struggled to reconcile our lot in life, or the condition of the world, with a God who promises abundant life. We may not be comfortable with talking about miracles and signs in the context of hard facts and scientific inquiry.

But we can still do what Jesus asks of us. We can still give him authority and serve him. We can do the heavy lifting, the hard labor, even when it doesn't make any sense. And by God's grace, through that tedious and seemingly meaningless work, we can be carriers of the miraculous, witnesses to God's wonders.

We aren't told that the servants came to believe in Jesus, but we do know that they knew where the wine came from. What they did with that information was up to them. But I'm going to bet that the next time Jesus came to Cana in Galilee, they were on the lookout for what he might do next. And do you know what they would have seen? A sign much greater than the resurrection of a wedding party. When Jesus comes back to Cana, he saves the son of a royal official from dying. He goes from bringing life to a dying party giving life to a dying child.

Wherever Jesus goes, he brings life. To parties and to people, to nations and to the world. The signs of Jesus' power, the miracles of God's love, are all around us. We can enjoy them, even if we don't recognize them. We can be puzzled by them, even as we experience them. Or they can draw us deeper into belief and closer to God. We can watch and wait with expectation, or simply do God's work in spite of our misgivings. Either way, God is at work and hoping we will notice.

To God be all glory forever and ever. Amen.