

First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, NC

Rev. Katherine C. Kerr

January 20, 2013

The Best is Yet to Come

John 2:1-11

January is a month of beginnings. It is symbolically and practically a time in which we kick things off- we start new budgets and swear newly elected officials into office. We make resolutions and break out new calendars. As we turn the corner from one year to the next, we all consciously and unconsciously think about new beginnings, hoping to leave behind the difficult things of the past and move forward into what the new year has to hold.

In the church, this time of year is celebrated as the season of Epiphany, a word derived from the Greek word meaning manifestation. In common usage, an epiphany is any sudden revelatory experience that leads to deeper understanding or clearer perspective in a situation. In the church, Epiphany is the time in which we celebrate the revelation of the divinity of Jesus Christ, focusing on the ways in which his divinity became fully manifest within his humanity.

While we celebrate it in January, Epiphany is not the beginning of the year for us. The church year begins with the first Sunday of Advent, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Messiah. After Christmas and our celebration of Jesus' birth, as the world around us moves into a new year, in the church we move into epiphany, and the beginning we celebrate is not the beginning of Christ's life, but rather the beginning of his ministry.

As with numerous other aspects of his life, the beginning of Jesus' ministry is presented differently in each of the four gospels. In Matthew, Jesus' first major act of ministry is his delivery of the Sermon on the Mount. In Mark, his first thing he does after calling his disciples is to cast out a demon from a possessed man. Luke

has Jesus first returning to his hometown where he immediately goes to the temple and sits among the teachers, asking questions and amazing people with his understanding. The epiphany comes at the end of each of these stories, when the gospel writers tell us in their way that those around him who witnessed his actions- the crowd, the man who was healed, the teachers in the temple- were amazed at his authority and understanding. As a result of these events, the people around Jesus had epiphanies, seeing him in a new way that changed their lives.

In contrast to these three acts which we can easily categorize as critical elements of Jesus' ministry – proclamation, healing, and discourse with the religious elite, John presents a very different picture of the beginning of Jesus' earthly work. In John's gospel, Jesus begins his ministry at a party. It's a wedding, in fact, and in Jesus' time, weddings were even bigger deals than they are today, if you can believe that. Back then, weddings usually lasted a week. And they were huge parties, full of food and drink. And, as we learn from the chief steward in this passage, the hosts always served the good stuff first, to impress their guests. By the end of the week, when people had been well-served, they brought out the cheaper wine because by then, no one would know the difference.

John's epiphany story centers around a wedding party running out of wine. Hardly seems like a crisis. Nevertheless, Jesus takes six large jars of water - a total of more than 150 gallons - and turns them into the finest wine anyone had ever tasted. And after that, John says, "all his disciples believed in him."

What are we to make of this? Christians have asked this question for centuries. While it is a magnificent feat, it can be hard for us to see turning water into wine as being as beneficial, or as necessary, as the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the cleansing of an unclean spirit, or expounding upon the law with the leaders of the Temple. It seems, in some ways, to be a fancy party trick and not much more.

It might be easy to dismiss it as such, if we stay on the surface of the story. And many people do. Many people see this story as simply a validation of a certain lifestyle. "Jesus went to parties," they say, "Jesus drank wine." Reading their own lives onto this story, they interpret the sign of turning water into wine as divine sanctioning of that which they want to do.

While it is true that this story gives us valuable insight into Jesus' human life, and reminds us that he lived as we did, he enjoyed food and drink and celebrations, we are sadly remiss if we leave it at that. This story is not about drinking.

Other people see in this story something disturbing about Jesus' human personality. When his mother informs him that the wine is gone, his response is jarring to our modern ears. "Woman," he says, "what concern is that to you and to me?" Some people want to dismiss the rest of the story because they don't like the way they hear him talking to his mother. But, as with other passages throughout scripture that sound harsh to our ears, we need to dig a little bit deeper before we just throw this out because it offends us.

Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman." Not something most of us are comfortable with today. But, if you'll notice, he addresses all women this way. While he may not call her "mommy," he is not insulting her; he is placing her in a category with all women. He disengages from her as his mother, which recalls his words in the third chapter of Mark, "who are my mother and my brothers?"

Even in his most human moments, Jesus knows who he is and to whom he belongs. Similarly, his question, "what concern is that to you and to me?" is not a rude one; it was a common question in the Semitic world, connoting disengagement. Both are addressed in his next statement, "my hour has not yet come," indicating that he understands his purpose on earth and has a view of the trajectory of his life and ministry. This story is not about gender issues or manners.

So if it's not about drinking, and it's not about personality or appropriate communication, what is this story about?

It might help us to answer that question by looking a little more closely at the gospel in which we find it. While similar in overall structure to the three preceding Gospels- this is, after all, a narrative about Jesus, John's gospel is, in many ways, different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. The language is different, most of the stories are different, the content of Jesus' teaching is different. In John, Jesus speaks in what one of my seminary professors called "overtly Christian language." That is to say, throughout this gospel, he proclaims himself Christ in a variety of ways. There is no confusing him here with just a teacher or a good guy- in John, the divinity of Christ is front and center.

Understanding this, we can then see this act as a manifestation of God in human reality. Jesus turning water into wine is not a magic trick or something used to calm anxious partygoers. It's not just a miracle for miracles' sake.

It can be challenging for us modern Christians to dig deeply into any miracle story, because we will inevitably bump up against the logical question, "if God could do that then, how come he doesn't do it now?" We look at the world around us, so full of brokenness and hurt, inequality and suffering, and wonder where God is in all of that, why God isn't breaking in and performing miracles like those we read about in Scripture. But we can't linger too long in this place, because any time we try to take scripture and make it make sense according to our own worldview, we are heading into dangerous territory. As one commentator noted, "if the contemporary reader does not experience a sense of dissonance when faced with this miracle, then the wonder of the miracle cannot be experienced either."¹

It's helpful to note that John doesn't actually refer to this as a miracle. He calls the divine acts of Jesus that the other gospels- and most of us- refer to as miracles, signs. With the use of the word *sign*, John is nudging us to realize that it's not the miracle itself that we are to focus on. The miraculous act is meant to point us to something else.

This sign is the first of seven in John's gospel, all of which reveal something about Christ. Unlike the other six signs, this one does not involve healing or feeding people, but just like any miracle, it "shatters conventional explanations and expectations,"² causing us to reexamine what we thought we knew about Jesus.

In other words, it's okay that it makes us a little bit uncomfortable, that it raises more questions than it answers, that it seems too good to be true. We don't have to be able to explain it; that's not the point.

The point is that God has given us this story among many others to reveal to us something about himself. In this extraordinary act of turning water into wine, Jesus offers us a unique glimpse into the kingdom of God. Turning water into wine is a revelation of God's abundant grace. In the ancient Near East, wine was

¹ Ibid. O'Day, p. 240

² Gail R. O'Day, The Gospel of John, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 539.

symbolic of sustenance and life. Throughout the Old Testament, we see examples of wine as a sign of God's covenant promises, as well as a marker of joy and abundant blessing.

So it's not just a party trick that we read about today. Jesus didn't turn water into wine to stop his mother's complaints or to keep the party going. This miracle, in all its mystery and abundance, is a sign pointing us to a greater truth. And that truth is this: in Jesus Christ, God revealed to us the radical and undeserved abundance of God's grace. It came in the form of wine at a wedding and love for the unlovable. It was revealed in the feeding of thousands and the raising of a man from the dead. It was shown in the acceptance of the outcast and the challenge to the comfortable. And it had its apex in the most unlikely of places- on a rough wooden cross on top of a hill, when Jesus' blood spilled out like so much wine to save us from our sin.

We don't have to understand how or why miracles happen. We don't have to get why these things which happened once don't seem to happen in the same way today. We don't have to have all the answers.

This miracle is a sign pointing us to a truth that is our comfort on the journey that each of us takes in this life. When the road we are on dips into a valley and abundance - whether of resources, of love, of strength, of hope, of anything - seems like a thing of the past, when we wander through a parched desert of grief or fear or loneliness or confusion and we can't seem to find our way out, when everything around us seems hopeless and lost, we need this story.

We need to know that in Jesus Christ, God stepped into the broken and empty places in this world and made a way where there was no way, generously pouring out love, trading emptiness for bounty, bringing new life where it never seemed possible. We need to see that, in the impossibility of our difficult situations, God is always present, working out his will and his purpose for us in the most unexpected of ways.

Like the revelers at the Wedding at Cana, who thought that party had run its course and time had run out, only to be stunned by the appearance of abundance beyond their wildest imagination, so too are we, as followers of Christ, promised that, no

matter where we are or what we face, how impossible the task or hopeless the situation seems, in Jesus Christ, the best is always yet to come. Thanks be to God.