

Wolfeboro 2016
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Telling stories about Jesus was the way that the earliest members of the church shared with one another and with new converts to Christianity just what life in the community of faith could be for those who became followers of Christ. These stories were eventually collected by the four gospel authors. But even in their earliest forms, they were told by people who viewed Jesus from the other side of the resurrection. And they collected and shared these stories in order to help Christians understand what is possible for us as we follow in the footsteps of our Risen Lord. To my way of thinking, all of these stories are helpful, even instructional, but not all need to be seen as historically factual.

Only in the Gospel of John do we hear today's story which begins, "*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited...*" Weddings are often some of the most joyful times in the life of faith communities. And quite frequently today, the marriage ceremony is only a small part of a long weekend full of activities. Normally there is a rehearsal dinner, but now there may even be post rehearsal party to which more of the wedding guests are invited. Often, the men in the wedding party go off for a day of golf or some outdoor activity, while the bride and her entourage get manicures or facials, prior to the wedding, and after the ceremony there is a lavish reception. And if all that isn't expensive and exhausting enough, frequently the newlyweds host a day-after brunch, culminating a three or four day event.

Well, before we get too critical of modern wedding extravaganzas, it might be good to recall that in first century Israel, custom called for the groom to provide a village-wide celebration, often lasting an entire week. For residents of small Palestinian communities, a wedding was one of the very few occasions for feasting and celebration, and so the daily festivities included not just family and friends but anyone who was in the village at the time. Fresh guests would arrive each day, and there would be dining and dancing and the constant offering of toasts with wine, for wine, as the 104th psalm reminds us, "gladdens our hearts."

Wine is the center of this delightful gospel story, when the unexpected happens and the wine runs out. Perhaps the guests had consumed more than usual or were simply too numerous. Had the host been cheap or simply miscalculated what provisions would be needed? It really doesn't matter, but the end result would have been a social disaster for his family.

I once read that guests customarily brought their own wine, and perhaps Jesus and his followers failed to do so, and thus Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks him to help.

At first, Jesus is reluctant to act. Perhaps this is added to remind us that sometimes we have to wait when God seems not inclined to answer our prayers in the way or when we want. Or it may be that Jesus didn't want to begin his public ministry in this way, knowing full well that a faith that is evoked simply by miracles is really no faith at all. Yet, out of compassion or because mother knows best, Jesus manages to save the couple's day without their knowing that anything had gone wrong.

And here the story gets a bit more fanciful and more fun when we look into the details.

Six very large stone water jars are said to be at the entrance, there for ritual cleansing or so that the guests might wash their feet when they arrived. Servants are told to refill all six with water,

which, miraculously, is transformed into wine. And when the end product is brought to the wedding-planner, he is astounded that the host would have saved the best wine for last.

John is careful to include a description of the water jars, each of which held between twenty and thirty gallons. Multiply that by six and you have enough to keep not just the wedding party but a whole village happy, if not a bit tipsy, for a rather long time. 120 to 150 gallons of wine is an extravagance, not unlike the over-abundance in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 which ended with twelve full baskets of surplus bread left over, pointing to the extravagant transformation of life inaugurated by the coming of Jesus.

And, of course, the general public knows nothing of what has happened. For it is intended for the disciples who are just beginning to learn about Jesus and what being in his presence can mean.

But what are we to make of this story? I think it has more to say to us than simply that Jesus was a caring guy, or one who liked a good party, or whose participation affirmed the institution of marriage, all of which are true.

We are in the season of Epiphany, literally the “showing forth” of who Jesus is for us, and John’s gospel includes accounts of seven events, or “signs” as he calls them, of just who Jesus is and what kinds of transformed living are possible in the new way of life that he brings.

This story then, I think, is more about symbolism than journalism. John chooses to tell this story, not simply because Jesus once kept a bridal party from being embarrassed; nor did he relate the story to validate the practice of drinking one’s relatives under the table, but because as a sign-parable it reveals who Jesus is and something of the abundant, hilarious, extravagant life he offers to us.

This mysterious gift of wine is a sign of happiness; it is a sign of hope, a sign of the abundance that comes with the love of God. And perhaps that’s what John intends us to hear, that where Christ is present in the fellowship of the faithful, the grace of God can turn the uncommon, the ordinary, into the extraordinary.

Jesus was in the business of blessing people’s lives. Time and again in gospel stories, we see him sharing the spiritual gifts that he had been given, providing abundantly for those in need, whether those needs were great or small. And what that says to me, and I hope to you as well, is that God likewise empowers us, as Christ’s present day followers, to do the same, becoming part of our Lord’s transforming presence in our day, allowing God’s presence, God’s spirit, to be at work through each of us.

During this season of Epiphany, our epistle readings are taken from Paul’s letters to the parish church of Corinth. And, as we hear gospel accounts of the manifestations of Christ, as we see these showings-forth of who Jesus is, at the same time we get a glimpse of how one congregation, did, or did not, appropriate that message for themselves. What I find particularly fascinating about the whole Epistle to the Corinthians is that it is not really a success story. The church in Corinth was a divided church, it was a polarized church, and since we only have Paul’s side of the correspondence, we don’t even know the outcome of their divisions.

Paul wrote to a congregation where some members were experiencing God’s Spirit in highly visible ways, and that was causing divisions. Those who spoke in tongues seem to have thought that they were the only “true Christians,” while others probably viewed them as hopelessly evangelical. Next week, we’ll hear Paul go on to admonish both sides. None of you, he wrote, can say to the other, “*I have no need of you.*” For you are each gifted, but in different ways, but all of these varying gifts are for the benefit of the whole.

Division in the church, like division in the world, was not limited to the first Christians, nor is it unique to us today. Differences on matters of belief or practice, divisions and cultural wars have been part of every branch of the Church in every century.

You may have heard over the weekend that the Episcopal Church is once again in the news, as a meeting of Anglican Primates, the heads of the 44 national churches that make up the Anglican Communion, has restricted some of the Episcopal Church's participation in some of the committees of the communion. The reason for this action is, of course, our Church's official efforts at full inclusion of our gay and lesbian members and our decision to permit clergy to perform same-sex marriages. This latest rebuke of our actions, I believe, may not be all that bad, for actually it may have prevented a break up of the Anglican Communion, where some of the more culturally conservative African bishops were threatening to leave. However, following the instructions of St. Paul, we must not give in to the temptation to say to those whose opinions differ from ours, "*I have no need of you,*" nor should they say the same to us.

Similarly, the vast majority of Episcopalian do not "believe that the theory of evolution is an atheistic conspiracy designed to destroy the faith of their children." And we are, in fact, proud that our last Presiding Bishop was also a microbiologist. Most Episcopalian do not believe that the Bible is an infallible document, dictated by the divine, and exempt from critical reasoning. But we don't dismiss those who ready the Bible differently from us. And, likewise, in this time of political polarization, we must be careful not to vilify those Christians whose views differ from ours.

During World War II, there was a German Christian pastor named Martin Niemoller. Neimoller, prior to being ordained, had been a U-boat captain in World War I, and initially he had supported Hitler, before breaking with the Nazis in 1933. He then helped to organize the minority of German Protestants who opposed Hitler, was arrested, and finally imprisoned in Dachau. He is perhaps best remembered for something he wrote there:

"They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Catholic.
Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

Divisions in the world and in the church are not likely disappear, so we must always be on guard against the temptation to dismiss those whose views are not like ours.

Jesus seems to have been in the business of blessing people's lives, not dividing them one from, always providing abundantly for those in need, whether those needs were great or small.

The story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee, for me, is an enacted parable, a tale of transformation, and like the other parables, points it beyond itself.

It points to a Jesus, who cares about things great and small, who is concerned about and present with people, and who continues to transform lives. It points to God's provision of abundance for us all, through the variety of gifts of the Spirit found in each and every one of us.

Amen.