

Second Sunday after Epiphany—Year C John 2:1-11

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” Near the end of his Gospel, John writes “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” And what are written so that you may come to believe? Signs. John structures his account of Jesus’ public ministry around seven signs—miracles that illustrate Jesus’ supernatural power—to demonstrate his hero’s divinity. The seven signs are: 1) Turning water into wine 2) Healing an official’s son in Galilee 3) Healing a crippled man in Jerusalem 4) Feeding 5,000 people 5) Walking on water 6) Restoring sight to a blind man and 7) Raising Lazarus from the dead. The Gospel, which undoubtedly served a purpose in the Johannine community itself, has in view primarily those who would encounter it later, readers who had not been part of the life of the earthly Jesus. In other words, the Gospel was written for us. It is through the experience of reading or hearing, of allowing ourselves to get caught up in the Johannine story that is being told that we are drawn into the saving encounter. John’s Gospel has no explicit moral commandments as in the Sermon on the Mount. For John, all salvation lies in the relationship of the disciple to Jesus, abiding in Jesus. The disciples’ trust and obedience bear fruit right away. They become the first witnesses of Jesus’ power .and the first witnesses of the kind of kingdom Jesus wants to establish.

The first Johannine sign occurs in Galilee at a town near Nazareth which was called Cana. In Cana, Jesus, attending a wedding with his disciples and his mother, changes water into wine. In Jesus’ time, a wedding feast was a huge occasion. For a Jewish feast wine was essential. “Without wine,” said the Rabbis, “there is no joy.” It is not that people were drunk, but that in the East wine was essential. Drunkenness was in fact a great disgrace, and they actually drank their wine in a mixture composed of two parts of wine to three parts of water. At any time the failure of provisions would have been a problem, for hospitality was a sacred duty; but for the provisions to fail at a wedding would be a terrible humiliation for the bride and bridegroom. I can just imagine Jesus’ mother Mary leaning over to him and saying in an urgent whisper, “We are running out of wine.”

Although this miracle does not occur in any other Gospel, it is consistent with the tradition that depicts Jesus' habit of eating and drinking with all kinds of people. The Cana event highlights Jesus' paradoxical combination of morally upright leadership with almost outrageous behavior, acting in a way that seems to invite excess. When informed that the host's supply of wine has run out, Jesus adds to the party's merriment by providing an additional 180 gallons of a vintage superior to that which the guests have already consumed. Now John did not mean for the incident to be taken with crude literalness. What John did mean to say is that when the grace of Jesus comes to us there is enough and to spare for all. No wedding party on earth could drink one hundred and eighty gallons of wine. In the same way, no need on earth can exhaust the grace of Christ. There is a glorious superabundance in it. In John's view, the fact that Jesus offers the means for celebrants to continue imbibing "good wine" reveals "his glory" and leads the disciples to "believe in him," as if confirming his qualifications to host the promised Messianic banquet.

What does the miracle of the water turning into wine say about Jesus? Notice that the steward assumes that the wine can be explained by conventional reasoning. He summons the bridegroom, thinking that the unusual quantity of wine is due to the great hospitality of the man, but the miracle cannot be explained rationally. Jesus' disciples, in contrast to the steward, see the abundance of good wine as a sign of God's presence among them. The miracle of the wine shatters the boundaries of the disciples' conventional world and the disciples are willing to entertain the possibility that this boundary breaking marks the presence of God among them. So they believed in Jesus as the revealer of God. The extravagance of Jesus' act, the superabundance of wine, indicates the unlimited number of gifts that Jesus makes available. When John told the story of Jesus, he was remembering what life with Jesus was like. Wherever Jesus went and whenever he came into life it was like water turning into wine. John is saying to us: "If you want the new exhilaration, become a follower of Jesus Christ, and there will come a change in your life which will be like water turning into wine." We don't need to exert any control over grace, we don't need to put any conditions on God's gift; we don't need to save ourselves. It's already been done for us and it's already there. The miracle of the wine invites us to see what the disciples saw—the abundance of God's grace. But what do we actually experience? Is it very fine wine or cheap Kool-ade? It seems to always come down to what we choose to see.

When I was first working on this sermon, I was wound up in my computer screen. I happened to look up and see a breath-taking pink and rose sunrise. It was as though God was clearing his throat and saying, “By the way, it is prayer time. Here I am, right here.”