

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

Romans 12:16ffJohn 2:1ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, + and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

When my granddaughters were young, we played a game of pretend, which for lack of a real title was simply called ‘poof’. It derived from a costume handed down from their mother. As a child, she and her friends read a book titled, Herself the Elf, about a woodland sprite with wonderous powers and innocence, and it came replete with a full outfit including a wand to spread joy around. A generation later it all came out of mothballs and was put to good use in play. The game began as a joke when the wand would be waved with a crisp flick of the wrist over a member of the house and the words, “poof, you are now...”. This transformed the person into another creature or an inanimate object. We would pretend the girls had become rabbits, or mice, or maybe a fawn. I, on the other hand, became a frog, a prince (which were interchangeable), a hippopotamus, and a rock. The pinnacle occurred when I was firmly changed into a glass of wine!! All it took was the wand, the magic of imagination, and a poof. There are likely times in life when all of us wish for a little magic that with a mere flick of the wrist would fill the spaces in us that become dry, frightened, or bored. Sometimes the glass does get dry.

The Gospel today is St. John’s account of Jesus at the wedding in Cana. It would not be unusual if our first and foremost attention goes to the turning of water into wine. It happens without even the flick of a wrist. Such a focus would make this an easier reading than viewing the whole encounter. But this is no simple story, and if we look for Jesus as a magician, a good moral teacher or just an articulate rabbi with memorable sayings, we will not find that here. Instead, the narrative has more twists and subplots than an Agatha Christie novel. Let us consider just a few now. In the very first line we have a reference to the ‘third day’ which is a famous phrase throughout the NT, but not generally referring to chronology, but the power of God to bring life out of death. (Remember the taunt at Jesus, (“You would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in 3 days”.) Then there is the dilemma of running out of wine, which would have been embarrassing, and was the responsibility of the bridegroom yet they come to Jesus for assistance. Next, to contemporary ears the exchange between Jesus and his mother sounds disrespectful, if not harsh. Literally the Greek reads “What’s this to you and me, Woman?” (I can just imagine my destiny if I said that to my mom!). We have a joke about getting people loaded and then giving them cheap wine. John refers to this as a “sign”, not a miracle, and there will be a series of them over the next chapters. Finally, this first major showing is in Cana, and Jesus concludes his ministry by coming full circle back to Cana. This is enigmatic.

Let me suggest that there are two lenses that help us hear and join this story. The first is the Church has this read in Epiphany, the time of peering into who Jesus really is for the world and for us. Second, is that John uses the Jewishness of this gathering as the way the revealing occurs. It is the symbol of the wedding—the marriage of two souls—that frames what God is doing through his Son, who is seen as the Divine Bridegroom. Go back and read Isaiah 62 to get a sense of context. Israel has come back from exile, but it isn’t a pretty sight. They are cajoled by their neighbors. “You who were God’s people are empty.” Isaiah says insults are hurled at them with names like “Desolate”, “Barren” and “Forsaken”—that is your husband has run off. They have been subjected and conquered by the immutable powers of life. Does that feel anything like your life over the past year, or perhaps is descriptive of an episode or era for you? Isaiah, in a play on words, says that God will marry his people and make them his “Spouse”. The great creator of all things will wed a people in need and share his own life with them. God will include and draw these people into his very love. This will not be a lonely-hearts club!! We will not be sitting at the bar crying in our beer, or wine. People will receive life in this marriage.

St. John is bringing us a first glimpse at Jesus, who is the Bridegroom of his people, the Church. He is the incarnation of the God of Israel—the God who comes deep in the flesh to lift us out of despair. We

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need to be clear and unequivocal that the God of Scripture is not some impersonal power binding the universe together. This past week we have once again been treated constantly to at least 20 episodes of the Star War series on TV. Although not as expansive as when viewed on the big screen, they are generally entertaining. But they also bear what I call the Hollywood Imprimatur of Theology. “The Force be with You” is not equivalent to “The Lord be with You”. The God of Jesus and the Church is not some numinous and impersonal force impervious to human pain or hope. The God we worship speaks, acts, rescues, redeems, and most of all connects deeply to the lives of his people and the whole of creation. This is interpersonal. God will marry his people. And the ultimate wedding and marriage will happen in, by, and through his Son.

In John, Jesus is not just another miracle worker or prophet or teacher. He is the very means by which God acts and therefore Jesus is the marriage of heaven and earth. Jesus is the crossroads where we meet God and are given God's life and energy and joy.

This is an unusual story. Unless you take it within its' Jewishness and background it will leave you with unfilled gaps and remain unclear. After all, who would plan a multi-day event like this and not order enough libation? Six stone jars of many gallons each should lead to a lot of “toasts” to bride and groom.

The changing of water into wine is a clue from John to several things. It is sign of the ultimate gift from God, the Eucharist. Throughout Scripture it is emblematic of being filled with God's life and exultation. Think for a moment of Isaiah 25 where the defeating of death is marked by a feast of fat things and wine on the lees (fermented with extras). Remember the account of Pentecost where the disciples are accused of drinking “new wine”. Consider the Last Supper and the 4 cups of wine for Passover. This event points to life that is filled with the supply of God's life in and for us.

Occasionally, when we were still able to enjoy a dinner with friends over a bit of wine, it has been with some disappointment to discover that the container is empty of a favorite vintage. The stone jars became empty so that they not only had no wine but required filling with water. I have puzzled about this aspect of the story—dry and empty jars. Obviously, it was a fopaux of the first order and a major source of embarrassment. But might it be that the vacant jars point to what life is like when we run out of divine life and connection? Mary gives it voice when she says, “They have no wine.” I suspect all of us have been there or perhaps are in that dry spot even now. It is when we have lost vigor and drive and focus and goals. It is when the intimate and energizing relationships have gone quiet or dormant. It is when that wine we call caring, welcoming, supporting, or simply sustaining runs out. It is what happens when rather than the presence of the Holy Spirit invigorating us, we hear no voice or liveliness for the day. It is in those moments that we might resort to the wistfulness of magic and look for someone to go “poof”. That works in children's games, but in the maturity of faith we are called to turn ever and again to the source which does not run out or dry—the Sacraments; to our prayer life; to the community where the Bridegroom is ever present. The events that are part of the marriage of heaven and earth.

In this story, Mary becomes the image and voice calling us to be open to Jesus' life in us and the world. The exchange between them is riveting. There are 2 aspects to which we should turn our attention. The first is the address “Woman”, which strikes our ears in uneasy ways. The first place we hear that term is in Genesis as reference to Eve (ayin in Hebrew), the spring or fountain of life. She represents all the living but is also the mother of broken humanity; humanity that becomes self-consumed and therefore empty. Mary becomes the mother of the Redeemer and therefore the second Eve through whom our salvation is brought into being. And note that we will hear this title, Woman, from Jesus a second time when she stands at the foot of the cross. She is the one asking for all that suffer to receive a measure of grace. The second aspect is the last recorded comment we hear from Mary, “Do whatever he tells you”. She becomes the voice to all the faithful be about the fulfilling center of our life.

John says this is the first sign Jesus does. It is not simply the first in a sequence of 7 in this Gospel, but first in its power and importance. John tells us the disciples who were with him came to believe in him—

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they trusted not in the miracle, but in HIM. When we are married to God's life rather than cheap substitutes we are made full of joy, love, rest, hope, and self-giving. Welcome to the wedding! Amen+