

July 27, 2008

SCRIPTURE LESSON: John 2:1-11

SERMON “Reading the Gospels Again: The Good News of Jesus”

When I was interviewing with the search committee from the church I served in Webster New York, one of the questions they asked me was, “What would you do if Jesus showed up at your door?”

One of the answers that I gave was rooted in our biblical text for this morning: “Quickly fill six large jars with water!”

Today, and again next Sunday, we'll be focusing on the chapter, “Reading The Gospels Again” from Marcus Borg's book, “Reading the Bible Again for the First Time.”

As we heard this morning, the author of John's gospel uses the story of the Wedding Feast in Cana to introduce us to the ministry of Jesus. Matthew starts with the Sermon on the Mount, a large collection of Jesus' teachings and parables, Mark begins with a preaching tour, Luke begins with the story of Jesus' being chased out of his own home town, but John introduces us to the ministry of Jesus with a party story. And, we are told, the story is a sign of his glory.

So what does the Wedding Feast at Cana tell us about the glory of God that was revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus? What exactly is the good news of the gospel?

One of the most striking elements of the miracle at the Wedding Feast at Cana is the incredible abundance. When Mary told the servants to do whatever Jesus said, he didn't just order another round of drinks for the house. Jesus expanded the party by providing 180 gallons of the best wine anyone had ever tasted. That is about 4000 extra glasses, and that was after the crowd had consumed all the wine that the host family had already provided. That was abundantly more wine than was called for. It was way over the top. It was so much wine it was scandalous.

Abundance is not our strong suit today. Most of us live our lives as if everything important is in scarce supply. We are frugal with our resources because we don't want to risk running out of anything we need. We don't want to spend too much or give too much away because we might not have enough left for ourselves. We are paying \$4.00 a gallon for gasoline because we are worried that there won't be enough energy available to fuel developing economies like China and India while continuing to meet the energy needs of all the industrialized nations. We ration out health care because medical resources are too expensive to share with everyone. Banks are foreclosing on houses in record numbers because they are afraid that people won't have enough financial resources to pay their mortgages. For the first time in our nation's history, the children of baby boomers have grown up believing that they won't get to enjoy the same standard of living that their parents had. Today's apocalyptic movies portray people barely surviving in a world plagued by scarcity.

Even here in the church we sometimes get caught up in our own theology of scarcity. We hesitate to take on any new outreach ministries because we worry that there may not be enough money left to pay our own bills. Once a month we dole out the sacrament of grace in tiny, half-swallow shot glasses and no one dares to ask for seconds. Instead of the best wine available, we use pasteurized grape juice. Some churches even exclude people from participating in the sacrament of grace. They only let you join the celebration if you are a member of their church,

or if you have been baptized, or if you have been confirmed, or if you have professed your faith with the words of a pre-authorized creed.

But when Jesus transformed 180 gallons of water into the very best wine, he didn't place any restrictions on its distribution. He didn't say, "This is only for the immediate family of the bride and groom." And he didn't say, "Set this aside for those true believers who understand who I really am." Everyone got to enjoy as much wine as they wanted. Wedding feasts in Jesus day were community celebrations. The whole town partied together. It wasn't a private affair for a few individuals who received special invitations. Everyone was included.

Here in Christ's church, we dole out grace as if there is a shortage, but the Wedding Feast at Cana - the story that John uses to introduce us to the life and ministry of Jesus - is all about abundance. The glory of God is revealed to us in this wonderful sign that Jesus performed.

I think it is significant that John's gospel introduces us to the ministry of Jesus with a party. He doesn't start with a warning, or a threat, or a cataclysmic event. Jesus does not break into the public scene by announcing a holy war, or by denouncing the evils of this sinful generation, or by threatening people with eternal damnation. Jesus launches his ministry at a party where people are laughing and singing and dancing and enjoying each other's company. And he doesn't end the party. He prolongs it as a sign of God's reign of love.

Instead of fear and judgment, John tells us that the glory of God is revealed in the joy of a wedding feast. The glory of God is revealed when family members put aside their petty squabbles, grudges are forgotten, and strangers who otherwise would never have met are brought together in joyful celebration of the gift of love. The Apostle Paul once wrote, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." The truth of those words is perhaps nowhere more evident than at a wedding feast.

Seven years ago when I was on sabbatical, Patrice and I got to travel to the Holy Lands on a study tour with a group from the Catholic Theological Seminary in Chicago. It was a trip that I had been looking forward to for a long time and we were really excited about the itinerary for the first day because we were visiting Nazareth, Jesus' home town, and Cana, the village where Jesus performed his first miracle.

But as often happens, our travel plans didn't quite work out according to schedule. We were supposed to meet the group from Chicago in Newark and fly to Tel Aviv together, but our flight out of Rochester got canceled. It was the last flight of the day and we had no other option but to spend the night in Rochester and take the first flight out the next morning. We arrived in Tel Aviv the day after our group's tour bus left to head north to Galilee, so we hired a cab and found our way to the hospice where the group was staying at the Mount of the Beatitudes.

The group had arrived the night before and had enjoyed a relaxing evening and a good night's sleep. They had showered, put on fresh clothes, eaten a hearty breakfast and were just getting on the tour bus when our cab pulled into the parking lot. Even though we had spent all night on an airplane and were weary with travel, there was no way we were going to pass up the chance to visit Jesus' home town, so we dropped our bags in the room, splashed some water on our faces, and climbed onto the bus.

Adrenalin can carry you a long way. That morning it carried us up Mt. Tabor where we visited the site commemorating the Transfiguration. It carried us through the streets of the small Arab village of Nazareth where we visited the church of the Annunciation. But we both hit the wall

and crashed just about the time that our bus pulled up to the small Franciscan chapel commemorating the Wedding Feast at Cana.

Patrice and I were the only Protestant couple in a group made up almost entirely of celibate priests and nuns. They had never been the guests of honor at a wedding feast but they were all really excited for us. Earlier in the morning they had gleefully asked if we would be willing to participate in a celebration for renewing our marriage vows at the site of the Wedding Feast at Cana, and had even carried forty photocopied bulletins of the liturgy all the way from Chicago.

We couldn't say no, but it was about the least romantic moment of our married life. We were hot, sweaty and dead on our feet. We were so bleary-eyed that we couldn't even focus on the words printed on the paper. Neither of us was in the mood for renewing our marriage vows that moment. All we really wanted was a shower and a good night's sleep. But the prayers and the songs and the joy of the community of people gathered around us that day as we stood beside a large stone jar on the site where Jesus once blessed the wedding at Cana made it a very special moment that neither of us will ever forget. When we were too exhausted to even contemplate the glory of God, it was revealed to us through a community of people who came together to celebrate the gift of love.

John's gospel tells us that the glory of God was revealed in Jesus at a party. So you might want to consider keeping some empty jars on hand as a sign of your readiness to be filled with the abundant joy that flows from the good news of the gospel. Amen.