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Why in the World Is This Jesus' First Miracle???

Jan 16, 2022 Epiphany 2C John 2:1-11

What do you think of when you hear the name "Jesus"? What kinds of words or images pop into your head to describe his life, his ministry, his works?

Probably its miracles like multiplying bread and fish or calming a storm; or perhaps his gift of storytelling, like the memorable parables about the prodigal son or the Sower of seeds. And we might also think of Jesus in a manger, or on a cross, or his empty tomb.

Do we really ever first think of Jesus at a large wedding party, and assisting the host family by miraculously giving them some great wine? (MEME of Jesus and water/wine)

The apostle John, of those among Jesus' followers who wrote up Jesus' life and teachings, chose to make this the very first miracle that Jesus does...turning water into wine at a wedding feast, where the host family evidently didn't plan too well, and the party is about to go sour. Jesus jazzes up the wedding feast; Jesus makes the party the party.

To me, that's pretty intriguing. The other apostles who wrote a life of Jesus don't even include this miracle - but John puts it right at the beginning, as his opening presentation on Jesus' acts, teachings and ministries.

I would argue that this fits in with John's themes about Jesus' teaching of the realm of God as a place of abundance and joy, and his anticipation of that coming time in Heaven called the Marriage Feast of the Lamb; a great communion-like imagery of all believers sitting at table together, celebrating the union of Christ and the Capital-C Church, which is often symbolically pictured as Christ's bride. Matthew's gospel has a great story about the wedding feast where people make excuses that they can't come, so the host father tells his workers to go out to the highways and byways and find people to come in for this great celebration, so the hall will be full.

Christianity is often pictured as anti-fun, anti wine, anti dancing, anti everything - we've leaned so much on sorrow, suffering, troubles, not sinning and so on, that we believers sound like we're uptight, too good for daily use, so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good (Mark Twain, I believe!) Yet here in John's first miraculous act of Jesus, he makes the party. And spares the host family embarrassment, too.

Yes, Christianity has many deep precepts of great import and thought. Yes, Christians care about tough issues like justice being done for all, advocating for the poor, living simply so that others may simply live - and can therefore sound pretty sober. Yes, Christianity teaches about Jesus being betrayed, and suffering on the cross - suffering to death. And Jesus takes on

subjects like taxes, imperial actions by Rome, habits of not treating workers fairly, and other bad actions of the world in which he lived, and we continue to live.

But largely, the repeated message of Jesus is, as he put it in the early part of Luke's gospel, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,..."* Jesus came proclaiming GOOD NEWS! Jesus came proclaiming HEALING! Jesus came proclaiming FREEDOM from the things that bind us, from the oppressions and injustice that hurt people! Jesus came proclaiming that the wonderful and blessed Realm of God was here at the door, inviting us to step into its abundance and fulfillment and joy!!! Jesus came proclaiming a community of people loving each other, loving God, and celebrating together the goodness of God's creation, and the gloriousness of God's salvation!!!

So while there is a sobering quality to the work we encompass, and perhaps our Kingdom ethics make us seem like goody-two-shoes to some, Christianity is supposed to be a celebration of God's new life, life with an abundance of meaning, an abundance of purpose, an abundance of enjoyment, an abundance of community, an abundance of sharing, an abundance of love, and abundance of joy. And for all people, not just the ones the world already favors. If we've turned Christian faith into something else, we've missed Jesus!

Life can be hard; I'm not trying to be a Pollyanna and overlook the real pain and hurt that we can experience. I'm not saying we're never stressed, overworked, grieving, worried for the future, or having our deepest feelings hurt, or done wrong. Yet as far as the kernel of faith deep inside us, that place where the Spirit comforts us and assures us of God's love, there is what Scripture called a spring of living water pushing up like a fountain - a hope based in God's promises and God's care, a trust that we stand on a firm foundation, an assertion that life is good. Even when a very real depression tries to capture us, we can cling to that hope, that trust, that promise. We can know that whatever may be done to us, eternal life and its glories are ours.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we call it a celebration, and review that (1) God called the creation good; that (2) even when people turn from God, God seeks to win us back, sending prophets and others, and finally sending Jesus....God doesn't give up on us and throw us out. And (3) when Jesus is killed, God raises him back up in a new life - even death doesn't defeat God. We might only share a bit of bread and a bit of juice during the sacrament, but it's just a reminder that one day we will feast with God in glory. It's meant to tell us that eating and

drinking from this creation of the world, is an eating and drinking in of God's very self. The sacrament reaches out into every meal we eat, every banquet we attend, every party we attend, and tells us that God is present.

I love the table as a symbol of Christianity - not a sacrificial altar, but a TABLE - a place of community, sharing, nurturing, caring- a place of generous hosting and receiving, a place of welcome. I love it when I can gather with my kids around the table at a meal, and we can tease each other, talk about stuff in our lives, take in the good nourishment that's been prepared in love, share what's there with each other - a wonderful picture in miniature of how all life is to be lived and shared with everybody. It's our home - and our true home with God.

I like the picture of heaven as a long table stretching further than I can see, groaning with good things being passed around - food and drink - people of every color, every shape, every nationality, every era of time, talking in depth, loving, caring.... And we have all the time we need to eventually get around to everybody, and taste everything, and be full. My favorite part of having relatives and friends come over for dinner, is sitting around after we've eaten; just the camaraderie and friendship of communing with each other. We'll get to the dishes, no hurry - let's sit and enjoy each other for a while. (Hopefully in heaven I'll be able to eat all the chocolate and sweets that I want and not feel guilty or get fat.)

It's not surprising that this sacrament of communion around a table IS a sacrament, one of only two that we Protestants celebrate. It's a vision of heaven, a token of a promised day, and an image that can guide us in our living. It hurts me that getting together for meals is among the activities that has been curtailed by the pandemic and is the thing I'm most longing to get back to. I love that John puts this story as the first miracle that Jesus does - it flavors everything that comes after.

This vision of the realm of God that we are to embrace and walk in so captures my spirit & my imagination, that I can naively forget that we as sinful people have a difficult time learning to discern what is of the kingdom and what is of the world, and letting the Spirit change our perspectives on how to be. To me, if we profess to be a Christ-follower, we are open to the Spirit convicting us when we are wrong and are eager to change. Fred gave the devotional at council this past week and talked about how habits and changes can creep up on us gradually, reminding me of the story of the frog that jumped into a pot of room-temperature water & thought it was fine....and as the burner under it heated it gradually, the frog didn't notice so much - he got used to it...until finally it was too late.

If we are not on guard about the ways of Jesus' kingdom, the ways of the world will creep up on us. The ways we do business in the world will creep into our ways of being the church. In the world, the goal is to make a profit, which colors how people are treated, how they try and get employees for the least pay possible, how they discriminate against women or people of color, or people of age - trying to make a buck drives the world's point of view. When folks come into a church, we unconsciously carry this model in with us; but those ways are not the ways of God's realm! God's realm is a realm where all are treated right, and there is no place for the ways the world does business and tries to make a buck. In God's realm there is no discrimination, no lying, no injustice done to others, no feeling that there is only so much to go around, and we have to hold on to what we have – NO, God's realm is a place of abundance, of caring, of equality, or healing, of justice! The Church, the body of Christ or sometimes the Bride of Christ, is not a business - those practices and mindsets need to be consciously rooted out with care, because it is so easy to carry it with us and pollute Christ's Church. Our purpose here is not to make money, hoard money, or turn a profit - our purpose is to develop gifts for ministry and service, and to worship God with our whole self. It feels more natural to do here what the world does out there – that has to be resisted, we need to be clear. The world seems to function in a model of scarcity, where we hold on to what we have while trying to get more - the realm of God functions in a model of abundance. The world seems to function in a model of every person for himself, in a dog-eat-dog kind of mindset; the realm of God functions in a model of caring, sharing, and lifting one another up to what God intends us to be. (I like it when the values of Christ's kingdom are carried over into the way we Christ-followers do business in the world.)

Our call is to learn to walk in this realm and demonstrate this Jesus path to the world. If we are instead copying the ways of the world in our church, what are we offering that is different and Christ-like? How then would people see the way of God, the ways of hope, caring, sharing, right-relationships, forgiving, restoring, abundance and joy? Why would people come if it's the same old same old within as without? Where's the promise there? The hope?

My vision of how the church could be, should be, is so strong that often I don't expect them in fellow Christ-followers. For me, part of following Christ in this new life is pondering these things, and actively rooting out the ways of the world in how we live together. So that our joy may be full, as the apostle Paul writes, so that the love of God will be manifest and shed abroad in this world. So that wrongs are righted, so that sins are confessed and forgiven, so that people are loved as God loves them. AMEN