

Epiphany 2C 2019, January 20, 2019, John 2:1-11, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt Strause

Two weeks ago we celebrated the Epiphany of Our Lord and we heard of the wise men coming from far away to worship the newborn king of the Jews. Last week we celebrated the Baptism of Jesus and we heard how God the Father spoke from heaven declaring Jesus his beloved Son. Today we hear the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine which John the gospel writer tells us was “the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.” Three stories of revealing Jesus for who he is. In the Orthodox church they consider these three stories; the coming of the Wise Men, the Baptism of Jesus, Jesus turning water into wine, as the fullness of the Epiphany, which means manifestation. Jesus manifests himself as king and Son of God.

Today’s gospel is one of the more famous of the miracles in the Bible. There is lots of tension here, which makes for a fine story. First of all, they run out of wine at a wedding feast. This is a real disaster. You’ve all been to weddings before. Not all wedding receptions might serve alcohol today. But then wine was considered essential to the celebration. So running out of wine would be like half your guests being served their dinner and then running out of food halfway. The second tension occurs between Jesus and his mother. Mary wants Jesus to do something about this disaster. Jesus at first seems reluctant. “My hour has not yet come.” But then he seems to change his mind, and changes water into wine. Finally there’s a third tension revealed in the exchange between the chief steward of the house and the bridegroom. It reveals the deceptive strategy most often employed during a wedding; serving the good wine first and holding the lousy wine to the end because by that time everyone is so tipsy they won’t mind the difference.

Turning water into wine is a great miracle. Jesus rescued a bridegroom from more than a mere embarrassment. The bridegroom was in danger of bringing a great shame upon himself. You see, hospitality as a communal value was way more important then as it is today in our culture. As host you were under strict obligation to provide for your guests. The water into wine was miraculous. But even more of a miracle was Jesus’ display of radical love and hospitality in saving this bridegroom and his family from years of shame and rejection by his community.

Looking for a miracle in the midst of potential disaster is something we sometimes do. When we are overwhelmed by life we start to pray more frequently and more fervently for some quick intervention on God’s part to turn it all around. We want a “water into wine” moment for ourselves.

I don't usually look to someone like Benjamin Franklin as a Bible commentator, but he said something about this I believe is appropriate. He said, "We hear of the conversion of water into wine at the marriage in Cana, as of a miracle. But this conversion is, through the goodness of God, made every day before our eyes. Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, and which incorporates itself with the grapes to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us and loves to see us happy!" Saint Augustine said something quite similar. "We take for granted the slow miracle whereby water in the irrigation of a vineyard becomes wine. It is only when Christ turns water into wine, in a quick motion, as it were, that we stand amazed." Both believe the natural process in which water is turned to wine is no less miraculous than when Jesus did it at the wedding at Cana. Augustine says we are amazed when Jesus did it in a "quick motion" but not when it happens slowly.

We want quick motion miracles. But we often overlook the slow motion miracles that happen all the time. God often sends into our lives just the right person at the right time. I've seen it many times in my ministry and in my own life: a visit to someone lonely and homebound bringing cheer and the warmth of human contact, a nurse at bedside pressing a cold compress to a fevered forehead, a friend's shoulder to cry on, a telephone call just to say, "I was thinking of you today, how are you doing?" These may not be the kind of quick motion miracles we hope for, but they are God's messengers, God's angels if you will, reaching into our lives in the midst of difficulties or hardships. They are like the water slowly irrigating the vineyard preparing the grapes to be turned into wine which is, as Benjamin Franklin says, "proof that God loves us and loves to see us happy."

Wine may be one proof that God does indeed love us and wants us to be happy, but revealing Jesus to us is the real proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy. We've heard how these foreign wise men came to Jesus to honor him. This tells us Jesus is for all people, not just the insiders. Yet it will be the insiders that wish to be rid of him. He is to be a king, but a king that rules humbly in a kingdom in which the poor are lifted up. We've heard that Jesus is declared Son of God but joins with us in our messy, sin-filled humanity. It will be human sinfulness that drives him to a cross outside the city gates. And here in the story of water into wine Jesus will say "my hour has not yet come." The hour is coming when he will be lifted up on the cross which is the true revealing of who Jesus really is. Jesus will pour out himself for the world in lavish and abundant grace. He is the new wine, the best for last, gladdening every human heart. Amen.