

Epiphany II January 17, 2010

The story of the wedding at Cana of Galilee has been read in Epiphany for a very long time. That's because the theme of Epiphany is the manifestation, the showing off to the world, of Jesus—of who he is, of what he is about. The business of changing water into wine is, in John's Gospel, the first of Jesus' miracles, the first time he gave a real sign to his disciples of what was going on with him. I want to talk about that for a minute this morning, especially from the perspective of the other lessons.

Now, when it comes to theology, this story contains an embarrassment of riches. In John's Gospel, one of the things that the miracles of Jesus do is replace the great Jewish feasts with the reality of Jesus' presence. Here, it's the Jewish rites of purification that are somehow superceded, and superceded in abundance, by who Jesus is and by what he does. At the same time, there is a very real connection between this scene and the material in Isaiah and throughout the Old Testament which likens the return of the Messiah to a wedding, and the joy of God's people to the joy of a bride and bridegroom. And there is much, much more. Lots of theology.

But it's also a story—and a great one. Mary starts out as the real hero, telling Jesus do to something for these folks who are in serious trouble. (By the way, there's an ancient legend that says that Mary was the aunt of the bride; and so might have been the person responsible for the wedding. That would certainly explain her interest.)

Anyway, Jesus says to Mary that all of this is none of his business and that he has other plans about revealing himself. His time has not come. Mary pretty much ignores everything he says and simply assumes that Jesus is going to be a good Jewish boy and *listen to his mother*—and he does.

Now, the folks who are experts on what society was like in those days make it very clear that running out of wine at a wedding was not a minor social inconvenience. It was not like, “Well, the wine’s gone, so we have to switch to scotch.” Instead, this was a major breach of the demands of hospitality; it was a disgrace and it would be devastating for the couple. Everywhere they went, for the rest of their married life, they would be known, ridiculed and pointed to—“these are the no wine folks.” The strain on their life together would be enormous. (After all, there wasn’t that much to talk about in Cana of Galilee.)

So, something deeply important—at least in the lives of the people who were involved—was going on. Jesus has to decide what to do. He has to decide whether or not to change his time-table—whether to wait before making himself known, as he had planned, or to act right then, for that need. Jesus acts, the wedding is saved, and the bride and groom are given a new chance.

At its deepest levels, this story is not about the bride and groom, it’s about Jesus. It’s about all that theology I mentioned a minute ago. But it’s about how the first time Jesus made himself known, even to his disciples, he did so, not according to his own plans—but in response to a real and immediate human need.

Think about it. Jesus’ first manifestation of his glory, the first of his signs, was not for or about Jesus. He didn’t throw a great big ‘Jesus of Nazareth Epiphany and First Miracle’ party, invite everyone in the neighborhood, and then haul off and do a miracle—just because he could

Jesus' identity, the Father's gift to him of who Jesus is, this was not something that Jesus had or held to for Jesus' own sake, for his own satisfaction, for his own convenience, or for his own fulfillment. Jesus revealed himself, indeed Jesus spent his life, for the sake of others. Who he was and what he had were not for him. It was always and only for others, from the very beginning.

Keep that in mind and turn for a minute to the Epistle. That section from Paul is about some of the interesting and peculiar things that were going on in the church in Corinth in the first century. There was some pretty weird stuff, and some pretty selfish stuff, and some pretty evil stuff. In the middle of it, as is so often true when religion goes bad, there was a strong sense of who is best, and a strong sense of **mine**. The Corinthians were having a whole boatload of different spiritual experiences and encounters with God—which could very well be just fine—but they were getting possessive and competitive about all of that. They were saying things like—this gift is mine, this way of doing things is mine, this spirituality is mine, this special something is mine—and it's better than yours.

What Paul says to them is what Jesus discovered when the wine gave out. What Paul says to them is “what you have is not for you. What you have is for others.” “To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.” This is a fundamental religious truth about the nature and purpose of God—both then and now. What you have is not for you. What you have is not even about you, not really.

The folks in Corinth would never get their religion right, indeed their lives right, until they realized that what they had was not for them or about them. It was given to them so they could use it to give, and to build, and to help, and to create.

What Jesus had, who he was by gift of the Father, what it was that made him truly unique, this was not given for Jesus' own sake. It was given so Jesus would have a choice, so that he could choose to give all of himself for others.

What we have is not for us. Not really. All that we have, whatever sort of thing it might be, from our lives to our stuff to our relationships with God and each other, all that we have is gift—and it's given us so we might be givers, so we might build up, so we might help, so we might be a part of something greater, so we might serve our neighbors and build up the larger body. In one way or another, that is the most gracious purpose of our lives, and everything in them.

This is good news. It is good news that we don't have to live for ourselves alone, that what we have is not for us.

It means that we are not created to live closed in upon ourselves, protective, possessive and defensive. We are not at our best when we try to live that way; we impoverish ourselves when we try to live that way; and we do not *have* to live that way. When we live beyond ourselves, for others and for the larger whole, then something wonderful can happen, something greater can be created; and there is more of us than there could ever be otherwise.

At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, Jesus chose to abandon his plans and his schedule, and to reach out. In doing that, he gives us a taste of what human life at its deepest can be like.

And there was plenty of wine at the wedding.