

Date: January 14, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 2

SERMON: New Wine for a New World

Text(s): Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-12

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One of the most universally joyous celebrations in any culture is a wedding. The rituals and customs may vary widely, but a party with lots of food and guests seems to be fairly standard just about everywhere. Movies like “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” or “Four Weddings and a Funeral” vividly illustrate that fact. Cultural critics like Stephanie Coontz (*Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*) tell us that we won’t be having many more “big fat” wedding celebrations, because the whole institution of marriage is in an irreversible death spiral, and within our lifetimes, will virtually disappear. I hope she’s wrong. Marriage patterns may be changing, but I don’t think our culture is quite ready to give up a prime reason for a big party for family and friends quite so easily.

When we participated in our first weddings in Malaysia, we were somewhat surprised to discover that relatively little importance was attached to the wedding ceremony itself. Usually only the family and close friends attended the service at the church. What was really significant was the wedding feast where it was always mandatory to have twelve courses, and the dinner usually lasted three or four hours.

The Chinese in Malaysia did not use alcohol heavily in day-to-day life, but at weddings, the beverage of choice was fine French cognac. At the feast, most guests sat at round tables of ten people, and most younger or middle-aged couples sat together. But the couples who were over sixty tended to segregate themselves into tables of men and tables of women. And as the feast went on, the older men sitting together rose, with ever-increasing frequency, to toast the happiness of the new couple. The meal was punctuated by a whole table of ten men, most of

them in their seventies, rising to their feet, lifting their brandy tumblers (and I do mean tumblers), and shouting at the top of their lungs in unison, "YAM SENG!" Which roughly translates, "Bottoms Up." One can only guess at the profits to the French brandy producers from a feast where several hundred or a thousand guests have been "yam seng-ing" for several hours. Weddings were not only joyous celebrations for the participants, but for the caterers and cognac distributors as well. But even in situations of poverty, though there may be no money for bottles of cognac or expensive caterers, people somehow manage to turn what little they have into a feast of abundance. The whole community contributes their labor or food and the party goes on.

I've always been glad that St. John began his story of Jesus' ministry with Jesus attending a wedding feast. Somehow, that really brings down to earth John's description of Jesus as the "Word become flesh." From his description, I think we can conclude that it was a "big fat Jewish wedding," if the amount of wine consumed is any indication. Although like most of the stories in John's gospel, this one has multiple layers of meaning, and kaleidoscopic recurrences of images and themes, one of the main points John makes with this story is that Jesus is a sign of the abundant life that God intends for humanity. God's vision for humanity, John is saying, is like a big fat wedding party.

Now it's patently obvious to anyone who is halfway conscious, that life is anything but. A wedding feast would not be the first image or metaphor that would leap to mind as a description of life as we know it. Certainly our national crisis centered around the disaster in Iraq could not readily be compared to a joyous wedding feast. Nor could all the more personal crises that seem to succeed one another with increasing frequency—the breakup of our marriages and families, the onset of life-threatening illness, the loss of a job and the attendant financial insecurity or hardship it poses. Only an idiot like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss could

keep insisting that this is “the best of all possible worlds.”

So is John just a first-century Dr. Pangloss— a buffoon who can’t bear or see reality as it is? Or does John know something that the rest of us don’t?

His story of the wedding at Cana is at once straightforward and baffling. The author has packed it with subtle cues and symbols that challenge the most careful of interpreters, but which richly repay those who give it the attention it deserves. It begins with the cryptic little phrase “On the third day. . .” I had read this story for years before that phrase ever sparkled enough to catch my eye. It’s such a prosaic little phrase, just a narrative time-marker, that it’s easy to skip right over it. But when it finally caught my eye, I went back and looked at the chapter before this, and discovered there several similar indications of the passage of time. Three times in the paragraphs prior to this, John begins a story by saying “On the next day. . .” Counting them up, and then adding this phrase “on the third day,” brings us to a total of seven. The seventh day has all sorts of symbolic meaning in the Scriptures. It’s the Sabbath which commemorates that creative rest of God at the completion of creation. In some Jewish writings, the seventh day symbolized the beginning of the days of the Messiah or the new age of the Kingdom or the eternal Sabbath which God would inaugurate. And I think that’s the particular allusion John intends here. One of the images of that new age was the image of a wedding feast at which there would be an abundance of food and wine. The prophet Isaiah used the metaphor of a wedding, in our Old Testament lesson for this morning, where God promises that the people of Israel will no longer be named “Desolate” but “Not-forsaken,” and God will be the Divine Bridegroom who marries his bride Israel. In another passage earlier in Isaiah’s prophecy that we often read at memorial services, the prophet says, “*On that day, the Lord will make on this*

mountain a feast for all nations, a feast of fat meat and well-strained wines, and the Lord will destroy the shroud that is over all nations; God will swallow up death forever.” (Is. 25:6-9) One of the signs of that new age of the Messiah, according to some visionaries, was that every vine would produce a thousand branches and every branch a thousand clusters of grapes, and every grape about 120 gallons of wine. I can’t believe it’s accidental that in this story, the six jars that hold the water that is changed into wine, have a combined capacity of about 120 gallons.

But the phrase “on the third day” also had great significance for the early Christians, for the “third day” was the day of Jesus’ resurrection. The primary significance of Jesus’ resurrection was that it was a revelation of the power and glory of God and a sign that the Days of the Messiah had arrived, the day of God’s ultimate triumph over the powers of sin and death. And it is just at this point that the opening phrase “On the third day,” ties in with the concluding sentence, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.” So in John’s hands, this story about a wedding in a country village in Galilee becomes an epiphany story, a story that points to God’s glorious victory as it will be seen in the life and actions of Jesus, the Word become flesh. In Jesus, the Messiah, the great banquet of the Kingdom is laid out for all the world.

Having been tipped off by the first phrase to where John may be going with this story, let’s allow the story to unfold itself for us.

In the midst of this wedding feast, where everyone’s having such a good time, a potentially embarrassing situation develops. There’s been so much “yam seng-ing” that the wine is about to run out. Now think how embarrassed you’d be if you were the bride or groom at your own wedding reception, and it looked as though the last twenty guests weren’t going to get their slice of prime rib, because the caterer hadn’t ordered enough. So Jesus’ mother notices the impending

social embarrassment, and comes to Jesus and says, “They have no wine.” Leave it to a mother to be paying attention to the details. We have no idea why Mary inserts herself into the situation like this, but she’s quietly trying to manage the crisis.

Jesus, like any other man at the feast, no doubt, has noticed nothing. He’s telling jokes and funny stories about the groom with his friends, and so he fends her off with a somewhat sarcastic remark. “*What is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.*” (Though we won’t get into it today, that term “hour,” which is one of those images that keep turning up in this Gospel, always refers to Jesus’ crucifixion as the supreme paradox in which God’s glory is revealed to those with the faith to see it.) By his use of it here, I can’t help but think that John may have his tongue in his cheek just a little. Jesus may not think his hour, the hour of the revelation of God’s glory, has arrived yet, but his mother obviously does. So she just ignores his rebuke, and with the infuriating confidence that mothers have, she goes to the servants who are carrying the food and wine to the tables and says, “*Do whatever he tells you.*”

I imagine that Jesus, at this point, probably rolls his eyes at his table companions, as he gets up, probably saying something like, “What am I gonna do? If I want her off my back, I’d better humor her.” So off he goes and tells the servants to top up the six large water jars to the brim. These were not jars of drinking water, but water for washing all the guests hands and feet before the meal in the rites of purification prescribed in the religious Law. Foot-washing water. Hmm! It’s further on in this Gospel, isn’t it, that we have the story about Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, where Jesus kneels in humility and washing the feet of his disciples and suggesting that they should go and do likewise? Just a coincidence? Maybe. But the author of this Gospel does love to play with words and themes and symbols, so I don’t think

my interpretative imagination is running wild to make the connection. We’ve already seen that the capacity of the jars is linked to the vision in some of the old writings about the abundance of wine the vines will produce when the Messiah comes. At any rate, when the servants have filled the jars, he tells them to carry some of the water to the caterer, the person who would be socially embarrassed along with the host, when the wine gives out.

There’s no indication that the servants or even Jesus’ disciples notice that anything out of the ordinary is in progress. It is the caterer who, when he tastes this foot-washing water (I’ll bet he had no idea what he was tasting before he did it.) discovers that it is wine of a finer vintage than what he had ordered for the feast. And probably no one was more surprised than the bridegroom, the host, whose duty it was to provide sufficient funds to serve all the guests abundantly. He didn’t know he’d saved the finest wine till the last. But he may be too happy or drunk at this point to be curious, or he may decide that he’ll take the credit for being a clever fellow, and the steward or caterer never shows any signs that he guesses what has happened. All he knows is that the good wine is now available to cap off an already wonderful celebration. The best is still to come.

Neither does Jesus say anything to call attention to what he has done. His mother probably just sits back with a satisfied smile on her face, saying not a word. But John does suggest that Jesus’ disciples figure out what has happened. And he says that this was the first sign that Jesus did. For John, that’s the point of the stories he tells of Jesus performing miracles; they don’t call attention to themselves and certainly are not spectacular public events that garner a lot of attention. Rather they are signs that point to something— to Jesus’ identity as the one who reveals God’s glory— but only to those who are paying close enough attention and whose hearts are longing to know that divine reality. When the disciples saw this sign, John says, they believed

in Jesus. Apparently, being a committed follower of Jesus is a prerequisite for seeing Jesus as he truly is— the revealer of God’s glory, or as John put it back in chapter one, they “*saw his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” They saw, at that wedding feast, a vision of a new world, a world charged with the glory of God, a world of where grace and truth are in abundant supply, instead of a world characterized by war and cruelty and injustice and falsehood. They saw a world of where no one goes hungry or is denied a place at the table, but where everyone is invited to a table where the blessings never run out, and where the best wine is still to be opened and brought to the table.

But that vision is only possible to those who are paying attention, to those who see the miraculous in the ordinary, to those who keep company with Jesus long enough and close enough to see the revelation. If we don’t stay close enough to Jesus, we won’t see the signs that reveal the glory. We’ll see all the other signs instead—the signs that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Everyone can see those signs. They point to Baghdad, to the West Bank, to Somalia. They ensnare us in political fights over abortion, stem cell research, illegal immigrants, and gay marriage. They entice us with shiny consumer toys, so that we fill up our anxieties and insecurities with stuff. They fill our eyes with visions of violence and greed and our hearts with cynicism, hopelessness and, ultimately, despair.

Thank God, there are always some who are paying attention to what Jesus is doing, and can tell any of the rest of us who will listen, people like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we honor this weekend. Thank God he had not only the clear sight, but the courage to tell us that racial segregation was not God’s will for us, and that there was something much better awaiting us if we had the courage and faith to see it and act on it. King’s dream was a dream of

God’s big fat wedding feast, a feast with an abundance of new wine in a world made new. The question for us is, will, we like so many others, be too busy with our own agendas, too caught up with our daily routines and business as usual, too driven by our fears to ever dream of the marriage of heaven and earth? Or will we, like Jesus’ disciples, stick closely enough to him that our eyes will be opened, and we will see what he sees— the dawning of the day when God’s abundant provision for us begins to become a reality for all the world?