Signs and Wonders

Psalm 77:10-14 Kimby Young

John 2:1-11 January 22, 2017

The third story of Epiphany is Jesus’ first miracle – the one we read today – the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Weddings in Biblical times were even bigger than now. They represented the formal joining of families as allies – pledging a Covenant of care and support. A wedding usually lasted about a week and entire villages were invited. It was a matter of honor for the families to feed and welcome anyone who came. Failure to provide for all guests could result in great shame for the families, or worse it could be considered a breach of contract and could nullify the entire wedding. Friends and family all contributed to the wedding during the entire engagement period to ensure enough provisions. If a host ran out of food or wine, it might be considered that they did not have enough friends or family to provide support. There is some speculation that perhaps Jesus is somehow related to the groom. Mary’s request to Jesus in private indicates that she was in the inner circle and new provisions were running low. She might also have felt honor bound to support the wedding couple – perhaps because they were related, or at least because they were friends. Perhaps there were more guests than expected. Perhaps the guests just consumed more than expected. It does appear that the family was well prepared. The scripture passage indicates that there were 6 stone water jars empty after the rites of ritual purification. The ritual washing was a part of the first day of a wedding to allow festivities to begin. Six jars is an enormous number of jars – as each jar contained 20-30 gallons of water. Normally a family would own only one of these ritual stoneware jars. So the fact that they had borrowed 5 more jars indicates they were well prepared for unexpected guests. And yet, they were running out of wine. Mary’s intervention in the situation shows her compassion, as she asks Jesus to save a friend or family member from humiliation. In her request, there is no doubt that Mary knows Jesus can do something. Maybe she doesn’t know what he will do. But she knows he can save this situation. She knows he can help. And despite his initial response to her – “My hour has not yet come” – Mary’s instructions to the servants – “Do whatever he tells you to do” - shows not only that she has the authority to tell the household servants what to do, but that she knows Jesus will do something. Maybe she doesn’t know what yet, but she knows Jesus will respond. There’s a little bit of humor in the exchange. “Jesus, they are running out of wine.” “What do you want me to do about it?” You can almost hear Mary laughing as she walks away. “Sure, sure, Jesus, it’s not time. It’s not your job. But I know you’ll help out because I asked you to.” The exchanges between Mary and Jesus in the gospel of John are very affectionate. The address, “Woman” in verse 4 sounds harsh to our ears, but it’s really very tender and connected in the original language and culture. And of course, Jesus does do what Mary expects. He saves the wedding party, without drawing any attention to himself. He provides extravagantly and abundantly for the guests – offering the finest wine imaginable. This is not only a literal gift – it is a symbolic foretaste of all that Jesus Christ will offer to the world - the best provision imaginable, wine overflowing, a banquet feast welcoming all who will come, open to everyone. This is the joyful feast of the people of God – a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God.

This miracle – like all of Jesus’ miracles recorded in the Bible – this miracle is more than just the literal action – more than just the unexplainable transformation of water into wine. All of Jesus’ miracles reveal God’s glory. All of Jesus’ miracles are meant to point toward God and to show us a little bit more about who God is. That is why this scripture passage is the third story of Epiphany. Miracles reveal God’s mystery, God’s power, God’s sovereignty over Creation, God’s provision of everything we need. Miracles point to a deeper meaning and purpose in life. They remind us that God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

The real miracle is not the unexplainable. The real miracle is the presence of God, the presence of the unexplainable, ungraspable, unfathomable, unknowable Lord of the Universe in our ordinary days and ordinary ways. The real miracle is that God cares about us, that God in Jesus Christ touches our lives, and by that touch transforms our world. The transformation is the miracle. God can take whatever we offer – plain ordinary water – and God can transform our ordinary gifts into whatever is needed, whatever is best, whatever is blessed.

We don’t need unexplainable extraordinary interventions in our lives, we need to recognize God with us, even in the ordinary miracles of everyday life. And they are all around us. The grace of forgiveness. The sympathy of a friend. The healing of an injury. The beauty of each day. The marvel of human ability. The blessing of work to do. The gift of something to share. The joy of someone to share it with. There are so many miracles every single day, and we sometimes miss them, because we are looking for the phenomenal, the unexpected.

So yes, the miracle at the wedding of Cana is fantastic – turning water to wine. But the true lesson of the miracle is that Jesus will always be here for us – in any time of crisis or need, God will provide. God will always give us what we need – but maybe not in the way we expect. The real lesson is that God can transform anything, any situation into bounty and blessing overflowing. God can also transform anyone – if we allow Christ to work in our lives for the good. And if we allow that transformation.

The final lesson that I glean from this first miracle story is that God wants us to be joyful. Jesus first miracle was at a celebration. Jesus first miracle was about belonging and love and fun. Jesus started his ministry – his first act of ministry – was to extend a celebration into the best celebration it could be. That is what God wants for us. Joy overflowing. Life and love and abundance. Receive that gift of God’s grace and rejoice.