

Pub Theology: *John 2:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, January 17, 2016, Epiphany 2, Year C

A police officer was following a car that was driving very erratically. When he pulled it over and walked up to the window, he was very surprised to recognize the pastor from one of the local churches. Noticing a flask on the front seat, the officer said, “Reverend, what’s in the bottle?” The pastor proudly said, “Water.” The officer said, “Reverend, let me see that flask.” When the pastor reluctantly handed it to him, he opened it, smelled what was inside, and said, “Reverend, this isn’t water. This is wine.” The pastor looked astonished and said, “Praise the Lord! He’s done it again!”

I don’t usually start my sermons with jokes...now you see why. But I couldn’t avoid it this morning. They say with telling jokes, timing is everything. And maybe that’s the better connection between this bad joke and our text this morning.

For this story is all about timing. We enter the story right in the middle of a Wedding Feast. In ancient Jewish culture, they didn’t have honeymoons. What they had was a week long wedding feast--day after day of partying. When we find the couple, it’s day three, with at least four more days to go. They’re not even halfway there, and they’ve already run out of wine. What horrible timing.

Now, I tell all the couples I marry that something will go wrong with their wedding. It always does. But I promise them that no matter what, we will achieve the goal, and they will be married.

And that sort of goes over about as good as a bad joke. Because, yes, they will still be married, but they may also be embarrassed. If their crazy drunk uncle shows out at the reception or the groomsmen play a prank in the middle of the ceremony or a bridesmaid passes out or an ex interrupts the ceremony or the ring-bearer loses the ring...they may still get married, but can they live through the embarrassment?

For Jesus’ friends, that’s their fear. They are on the verge of great embarrassment. Wedding parties were the social events of the town, and if the family ran out of wine--well, it was a social *faux pas* that would be almost impossible to overcome.

That’s why Jesus’ mother comes to her son, alerts him of what’s about to happen, that the wine has run out, the party is about to end prematurely, and their friends will forever be stigmatized by the embarrassment. “Do something, Jesus,” she says. And Jesus’s response: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” It’s not my time, yet.

I called this sermon *Pub Theology*, and I did this for a couple reasons. The first is to make another bad joke. They’re drinking wine...we’re asking what this story means--it’s Pub Theology. And another reason is an excuse for me to mention to you the Bible Study

event we called *Pub Theology* that we held a few months ago at 804 Main, that we hope to soon have again. On January 28th, at 7pm, in fact. We will meet over drinks and appetizers at 804 Main and discuss the big questions of our faith.

That's why I called this sermon "Pub Theology" is because that's what "Pub Theology" is all about--asking together deep questions of our faith, and this story brings up a lot of questions.

Like, why does Jesus talk to his mother the way he does? It's very unexpected. Kids, I'd recommend you not follow Jesus' example here and call your mom, "Woman." Spouses...I'd recommend you not call your wife, "Woman," either.

Now, I don't think Jesus is just being rude here. He's distancing himself, from her and from the problem at hand. It's not our problem, it's theirs. We won't be embarrassed, they will. And, besides, my time has not yet come.

This, too, is surprising and very unexpected. Who cares if it's your time or not--the need is here. Can't you just do something?

And that leads to what may be the hardest question this text raises. In a world of so much need, we want to ask, along with Jesus' mother Mary, "Can't you do something, Jesus?" Sometimes, divine inaction is hard for us to swallow.

Maybe you're stuck on the question of plausibility. Frankly, it's hard to imagine such things being possible. Water to wine...seems more appropriate for a joke's punch line than a story of our faith.

Of course, for someone like me who grew up in, what we call in the south a Tee-Totaling house--which is a slang southern term for someone who stays completely away from alcohol--the real question is why would Jesus, the Son of God, have anything to do with wine, especially in such excess. 6 jars, each holding 20-30 gallons--that's 120-180 gallons of wine! Good Christians don't drink wine! Why *this* as your first public sign?

Frankly, nothing about this story seems like Jesus.

Or at least like the Jesus we've made him into.

Søren Kierkegaard, the prominent Dutch theologian of the nineteenth century, said, of this story: "Whereas Christ turned water into wine, the church has succeeded in doing something even more difficult: it has turned wine into water."

Maybe this story raises so many questions because we're not used to seeing Jesus, let alone God, as someone who would have anything to do with a party.

There's one little detail we almost skipped over in the story. These 6 jars, they're not just any old stone jars. They're jars used for the Jewish purification rites. They're holy jars, part of the old, religious customs of the people. And they're empty.

We're in the middle of what the Church calls the season of Epiphany. It's a season where we celebrate the surprising appearances of God, as a star shining to Wise Men from the East, as a dove at baptism, or as water becoming wine.

We need these reminders, because, too often, our religious customs and symbols become empty, and we are unable to see the appearance of God in our midst.

So, Jesus takes these empty jars, these empty religious symbols, and he fills them with something new and surprising. The best wine anyone has ever drunk. Sometimes, drinking wine can cloud your vision. But drinking of this wine makes our eyes wide open--again or maybe for the first time--and we can see Jesus as the one who invites us to party in God's abundant joy.

Today is also Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, a seemingly jarring contrast to a story about a party. For King's life ended so tragically, so hatefully. King's life's mission was hard, and he often paid a hard price--even before he was killed. His home was bombed. He was imprisoned. His family was strained by the long travel and the threats. He was beaten and cursed at and hated.

And yet, he had a joy that could not be taken away, because it was rooted in his true identity and calling. He was living his life sold-out to God's mission, and the joy such a life brought was so much greater than anything else that may happen to him.

Only two months before Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, his home church. That Sunday he said, almost prophetically, "Every now and then, I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, 'What is it that I would want said?' And I leave the word to you this morning... I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

Living your life for others--that is true joy. And true, joyful religion isn't one that is focused on rituals of purification which make ourselves pure and holy on the outside, but it is one that pours itself out in joy for others.

For the steward in the Gospel, he didn't know where the wine came from, but what surprised him most was that the couple saved the best for last.

And isn't that how it is with God? Even when life is hard, and you feel like you do not have reason to celebrate. Even when you think you cannot go on anymore. Even when someone like Dr. King pours himself out in the fight for justice, and is killed because of the very hate he fought so hard against, there is still joy. Abundant joy!

For we serve a God who saves the best for last. Who always has another jar of the world's finest wine ready to be served. Nothing can stop the party of God's kingdom.

Not even us.

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