

Joyful Abandon

January 23, 2022

Weddings

Part of ordained ministry is getting to be there with people for the deepest parts of life: baptizing babies, counseling couples as they decide whether to forgive one another or not, walking with families in the hours and days after a loved one's death, AND, if you can get past the stress of having a Pinterest-perfect day, past the all too often fraught inter-family dynamics, celebrating weddings. It's truly an honor to be let into the most profound times in your lives. In weddings, there's a joyful abandon, a powerful hope, that cannot be denied.

That joy, that glee, that abandon, is at the heart of our Gospel passage today. I'll be honest, this is my absolute least favorite miracle story. Yeah, it's okay to not like a passage. In the overwhelming majority of the stories we have of the miracles of Jesus, the miracle results in a transformed life: physical, spiritual, and social blindnesses are washed away, leprosy is healed and the resulting ostracism resolved. But in the wedding at Cana, a groom is spared some embarrassment. Come on – being healed of a seven-year hemorrhage versus being spared some embarrassment? The results of this miracle seem paltry.

In fact, embarrassments can often be helpful, growth experiences. They help us to be better prepared next time, remind us not to gossip, to count to ten before you send. That Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John is to save a groom and his family from embarrassment has always seemed, in my mind, to be, well, below him. Shouldn't he be crusading against injustice, like the way his ministry starts out in the Gospel of Luke, instead of meddling with the catering?

Yet this story is in the canon. This story is included in the Gospel of John, the most systematic and artfully crafted of the Gospels. Somehow, since at least the fourth century, this story has been considered sacred by the church. Clearly, there is something more going on here than a story about saving someone some embarrassment.

For me, this story finally came alive when I stopped looking at what it did in the recipient's life, and instead started looking at it as a story of what it tells us about who God is and how God works. Indeed, some scripture scholars call this John's epiphany – this is the text in John's Gospel where the initial revelation of the incarnation takes place. No, the wedding at Cana is not a lesson about a transformed life, it is a witness of God's extravagance, God's abundance, God's magnificent and radical action, even within the mundane places of life.

This is one of those places where knowing measures and conversions can be very helpful. Verse six of our text says that there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings. The Greek text goes on to describe that each jar held 2 to 3 measures. In the ancient world at this time, a "liquid measure" was a unit of measurement. Modern translators have helped us out by calculating that to somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons.

One hundred eighty gallons! Jesus turned 180 gallons of water into wine. Actually, when I did the math, it came out to 187 gallons or, according to the standards of wine bottles that have been in place since 1979 in the US, that's 942 bottles of wine. Makes the one bottle I brought to a

Christmas party seem rather puny, doesn't it? After our wedding, I think we had 11 bottles leftover...think of the storage space this wedding couple had to clear out!

And that's the point. Often, when God acts, God ACTS. When Jesus finally realized that his time had come, he didn't hold anything back. And THAT, my friends, is the sacred core of this story. Jesus created with abandon. He offered not just abundance, but extravagant abundance: 942 bottles of wine.

And that is also where our readings for today and those we read last week today intersect. In the First Letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes: "to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." Did you hear that? To EACH individual...each.

When was the last time that you felt gifted? Have you, recently, contemplated what your gifts are? In this passage from Corinthians, Paul says that we are all given a manifestation of the Spirit. Often, these gifts are easy to see in others.

I have a friend whose hospitality is second to none. The moment you come into her presence, you feel cherished. In fact, you usually leave her with a bounce in your step, feeling better about yourself and the world.

Similarly, we often find it easy to see the giftedness of children. When Christian and Charlie Reese played their instruments during our Christmas Eve prelude, we all felt a palpable joy.

But what about you? Paul says that we are all gifted. Is your gift wisdom? Is it recognizing beauty? Do you have the gift of helping people see hope? Can you heal the broken hearted? Do you have the gift of interpretation, being able to help people with divergent ways of communicating be able to understand one another? Could the Holy Spirit have given you that gift of organization for the purpose of rallying people to fight poverty here in Green Bay or to organize people to fight sexual violence in Darfur? Have you been graced with the gift of being able to see "the big picture?" How might you offer that in the service of God's reign?

All of these gifts are given for the purpose of serving God's reign, for the transformation not only of your life, but the lives around you. The brief hymn that Mike will sing for us in a little bit, "I Will Change Your Name," is based on Isaiah 62:4 where we read, "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in You, and One Who Belongs; for the LORD delights in you." The world, the realm of God, needs your gifts.

Where would we be if Martin Luther King had decided not to risk, if he had decided to keep his gifts to himself? What if Madame Curie had decided to maintain the status quo, staying home to clean the house instead of revolutionizing the laboratory? To be fair, I understand that these examples are both inspiring and daunting. King's gifts changed the world, but he and his family paid the ultimate price. You may not be gifted with a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that will change the world, but you may be gifted with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that will change someone's world.

When I was in college, I was graced with the opportunity to take my grandmother out to breakfast every Sunday. By the time my junior year rolled around, her dementia had taken a pretty strong hold over her life, but she had her own ideas about how things should be done. By this time, the visitors to her door started to slow. She told the same stories, in the same inflection, week after week.

But I had been given the gift of enjoying her quirkiness as well as the gift of patience, and so every Sunday, I would take the bus to her assisted living community just off of Military Avenue, reach into the tea pot where my uncle hid the car keys because my family didn't have the courage to take the car away from her, but she really, really couldn't drive, ease on her slippers (by this point she was refusing to wear shoes), and drive her to the Bay Motel to eat bacon (extra crisp), dry rye toast, and hear the story one more time of how she and my grandfather met at a dance at Bay Beach.

Conclusion

Sometimes, we are called to be Martin Luther Kings, Marie Curies, and sometimes we're called to comfort the last days of a weary soul and give them a space to retell a beloved story. Now here's your assignment: this week, I invite you to contemplate the intersection of today's scripture readings with those from last week. First, pray about how the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, about how you've been gifted by God. Then (as if that first task isn't a hard enough) pray and contemplate, invite God in with joyful abandon. Ask God to use you in some extravagant way. Ask for the grace to offer your gift in abundance, with abandon. In doing so, whether you change the course of history or simply change one person's history, you will be part of how God is transforming the world.

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