

Epiphany 2, 2016

Signs, Wonders, and Next Steps

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Well, when last we left Jesus, he had just been baptized in the Jordan River. We heard this account last week on the first Sunday after Epiphany, as we do every year from either Matthew, Mark or Luke. And if we track along in any of those three gospels, the next thing that Jesus does post-baptism -and-wilderness-testing, is to inaugurate his ministry. In Mark, he immediately begins exorcizing demons and healing people. In Matthew he preaches the Sermon on the Mount and Luke, he establishes his prophetic agenda by way of Isaiah. But the Lectionary this year gives us the gospel of John. John kind of avoids the whole baptism of Jesus thing, and definitely makes no mention of the wilderness testing. And though healing and proclamation will factor heavily into the entire gospel of John, the very first thing that Jesus does in John's gospel is go to a party.

Wait. So Jesus was an Episcopalian?

OK, maybe not. But if Jesus is, indeed, the perfect revelation of God (a claim of faith by Christians and explored in all the gospels), then Mark understands this first and foremost as God asserting mastery over the chaotic forces of the world. Matthew and Luke understand this first and foremost as God seeking to be known through Word and Action. And John understands this as God revealing gracious abundance.

It's great drama. The wine gives out which would have brought a lifetime of shame to the wedding party family in that honor-bound culture. Jesus is goaded by his mom into doing something and what he does is his first miracle in John's gospel – the turning of water into wine. And not just any wine, but the finest wine imaginable. And not just a little, not just enough, but a superabundance. One of the commentators I read did the math and determined that the amount of water Jesus turned into wine would have been comparable to 1000 bottles of wine such as we typically buy at the store. Which, if you then do the agricultural metrics, would have required just over a ton of grapes, had the wine been produced in the... more commonly accepted manner.

We are meant to be overwhelmed by the imagery John gives us and to see in it that God operates very differently from how we do. In cases where need exceeds supply (and that's reality in one way or another for many of us), we employ various methodologies for doling out the resources. Whatever our methodology is, our anxiety rises. Sometimes we feel embarrassment or shame. Sometimes we get angry at those who represent the need because their presence reminds us of how precarious our own well-being is. Sometimes we feel envy at those who have more resources to begin with, who seem to have it all together, who never seem to run out. In the case of weddings among first century Galileans, the method of dealing with inevitable scarcity was to serve the best wine to the most important people first. The less important people got a watered down version of wine mixed with water and vinegar. As the party continued, the more important people got a watered down version and the less important people got nothing at all. That's how it worked then. And, in a metaphorical sense, that's how our world continues to operate now.

And how easy it is to assume that our method for dealing with scarce resources is how God operates too. How easy it is to assume that God's grace is for insiders only. You know, people like us. Let me share with you what one of my favorite writers had to say:

This happened at a wedding which would have meant the entire village would have been present. All the guests get to experience this act of grace. All watch the steward pour wine in their glasses when they thought their cups would stay empty. All get that first scent of fine wine and be surprised.

All will take that first sip and say, "where did this come from?" All will have the opportunity to respond to Jesus' voice and know life. Because God's grace is for all.ⁱ

As I said, we are meant to be astonished by Jesus's action. But we are meant to see it as a sign, not as a transaction. Jesus didn't do this to wow the crowd then, nor to prove to his followers then or now that he had supernatural powers. Miracles in John's gospel are signs. They point the way to people who are on a journey. They give important clues about ultimate reality. We are meant to see God's grace offered freely and lavishly among the unlikeliest of people. That in God's realm, the ordinary IS extraordinary. Which means that we ordinary followers of the Incarnate God are invited to participate in God's extraordinary plan of salvation. We are invited to see the world as God sees it, and as we are able to do what God does. Show up with eyes wide open. Taste and see. Ask the questions of wonder. Love God. Love our neighbors. Change the world.

ⁱ Karoline Lewis, "Embodied Epiphanies," WorkingPreacher.com, January 10, 2016.