

*Epiphany II**January 20, 2013*

I have a confession to make—I have always had a hard time with the Gospel for today. This has especially been true since I have been a preacher. This same text is used regularly for this particular Sunday in the church's year—the second Sunday after Epiphany. In fact three passages-- the wedding at Cana, the Baptism of Jesus, and the visit of the Wise Men-- have been used by the church for many centuries as a triptych for Epiphany, telling how Christ was revealed to the world.

Today's Gospel is chosen because it represents Jesus' first miracle. And perhaps that is why it has given me trouble over the years. I mean, it is not the type of miracle I would have chosen to kick-off a powerful public ministry. It seems from the passage that even Jesus had some hesitation as his mother asked him to do something. Why this setting to let people know that Jesus can do miracles, that Jesus is someone to know and to follow? I don't know.

This miracle is not mentioned in the other three canonical Gospels. After Jesus is baptized in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus goes into the desert to pray, to be tempted, and to fight the devil. That seems like a more fitting beginning for his powerful public ministry to come. But John's Gospel doesn't directly mention Jesus' baptism and doesn't mention the temptation in the wilderness at all. Instead Jesus eases into ministry and begins with a miracle that his mother tells him to do at a wedding. Strange.

It is strange to me because at some level it doesn't feel that important. Now I have done research over the years and there are many symbols present—wine, a banquet, a wedding—all point to the anticipated messianic feast that the Hebrew prophets and leaders of the early church were expecting at the end of the age. Jesus' first miracle in that sense anticipates what all miracles point to—the fullness of time in which God will set all things right and humanity and all of creation will celebrate. We get echoes of that anticipated celebration in the passage from Isaiah that we heard this morning.

But still, there's a part of me that wonders why Jesus miracle would be in the midst of something so... routine. I mean basically what he is facing is a catering issue. The host is facing some level of embarrassment. Mary seems to be over-functioning a bit and encouraging Jesus to over-function, too. At some level, this was not his problem. That explains in part his initial response. Jesus even seems a bit annoyed with his mother. I know what my mother would have said to me if I called her "Woman." But that's another issue.

So why now, why this, for Jesus' first miracle? What do you think? Beyond the symbolism, this miracle reveals a deep truth about God and the ministry of Jesus—the power of God's abundance in the everyday details of our lives. Just think about it. Few things are more basic in human life than marriage; and a wedding feast is an important way to begin and celebrate this cornerstone of society. This was especially true in Jesus' day and culture. Weddings were something everyone looked forward to as a way to get through the humdrum boredom of everyday life. So this miracle affected something routine—but important.

But still I struggled with this passage as I prepared my sermon. I tried to think of other miracles that might have been “better” as the first miracle. The first miracle I thought of was the miracle of the loaves and fishes. It is “bigger,” more overwhelming and even more memorable. Jesus takes a few loaves of bread and even fewer fish and feeds thousands. All four Gospels mention it—the same basic miracle is even recorded twice. We have a serigraph print of that miracle in our hallway near the parish hall. Now that would be a good first miracle. But as I thought about it, I saw a similarity— first, we have another catering issue. This miracle is about a travel group that didn't plan a meal. And there's nothing more basic than eating, nothing more human than hospitality to travel companions. Jesus took on both of these basic, routine aspects of human life and filled them with God's abundance, just like he did in Cana.

There are other miracles in the Gospels that are more dramatic—the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac or Jesus walking on water or the raising of Lazarus from the dead, for example. And each of those dramatic miracles serves a purpose. Yet for this first miracle of Jesus, I am glad Jesus took on a catering issue... and did what his mother told him to do. Because this miracle of more wine for a party makes Jesus and the kingdom of God so much more human—even funny. God reveals God's Son in a way that many of us would never expect. And that every day miracle at a wedding points to the messianic banquet that we anticipate at the end of the age.

So like I often ask at this point in the sermon, what does this mean for us? What can we learn because God revealed God's Son in such a routine setting, meeting such a common need? We learn we can rely on God in routine settings, too. We don't have to wait to pray only when we're facing something big. We don't have to wait to act for only what we think is really important in order to do something that makes a major difference to people—and to God. Little things all around us are filled with God's abundance every day. And sometimes we can be part of those every day miracles.

Like when a person is sick. That routine everyday thing is an opportunity for a miracle. Jesus healed sick people all the time. In our world today, people of faith can still be part of miracles. Some of us pray, some even anoint with oil and lay hands on people—and they get well. Others have pursued extensive training as physicians and nurses and use that skill and

experience to treat people who are ill. It is amazing what modern medicine can do as part of the healing process. Others of us do more routine things, but when everyday things are done from faith and in love, they too can be filled with God's abundance.

Like when you are in the hospital and two dear people bring you a blanket that has been knitted by another dear person just for the purpose of bringing comfort to someone who is sick. How does it work? I am not sure exactly. It may not be as stupefying as turning water into wine. But there is a change that occurs. Someone who might feel lonely or sad or afraid can be transformed by simple yarn knitted by skilled and loving hands. Warmth is provided—but so much more than that, too. Something routine is filled with God's abundance.

Or when you are at home resting after being in the hospital and two dear people show up with boxes and bags of food. Like the wedding at Cana and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, another catering issue is addressed! But this time, bread and fish were not multiplied. Instead some people cooked soups, another baked pound cake, someone else prepared banana pudding—and on and on. God's abundance was found in the routine parts of life-- not unlike that first miracle of Christ.

So this first miracle of Christ that revealed him to the world reinforces what we may forget—that God's abundance is all around us in the routine things of life, from basic human kindnesses to the unexpected and the mysterious which we label as miracles. Look around today in church... and later at home... and throughout the week to come. If we open our eyes, we may be surprised at what we find. When we find God's abundance in the routine and the everyday, let us be grateful. Amen.