

Jan 9, 2022

Baptism of the Lord

John 2:1-11

“The First Sign”

1. Tracy and I have two friends who really know their wine
 - a. Maria and Karl are really smart and accomplished (she is a scientist and he’s a surgeon), and one of their hobbies is to know about wines
 - b. They have gone to classes to learn about wines, they have traveled to wine regions
 - c. And this is the best part: they’re very generous with their knowledge... AND their wine!
 - d. When we visit them we know we’ll be treated to some really delicious wine
 - e. And they’re not snooty about it either. It’s not like they only drink super expensive wine and then sit there to talk about the wine’s cherry or raspberry notes, or its flowery bouquet
 - f. No, instead they want to share the stuff they like, to enjoy it in company
 - g. To them sharing wine is about sharing in one of the joys of life.
2. I suppose that we don’t talk much about Jesus knowing about wine, but he did
 - a. The times we may think of Jesus talking about wine have to do when we participate in communion and in today’s story.
 - b. Unfortunately the way Jesus talks about wine is, well, boring.
 - c. Well, maybe not boring, but certainly intense.
 - d. In communion, we can’t get away from thinking about wine and Jesus’ blood
 - e. And actually, in today’s story that theme is there too
 - i. There is a kind of bookend effect here, if you’d like
 - ii. Here, at the very beginning of the gospel, we see Jesus and his mother, and when she asks him to deal with the wine shortage in the wedding, Jesus replies abruptly by saying “it’s not my hour yet” (meaning his time to die) and yet still transforms water into wine
 - iii. And then the other bookend at the end of the gospel is his crucifixion, again there is Jesus and his mother, but this time Jesus is up on the cross bleeding and dying and Mary is at the foot of the cross crying, and from the cross Jesus tenderly instructs his beloved disciple to take care of his mother.
 - f. But what today’s passage also shows is a miracle of turning water into wine as anything but boring. It shows us a Jesus who is, above all, focused on sharing, focused on community, and focused on love.
3. It’s hard to untangle the meaning of a story from another culture and from two thousands years ago, but we would do well to keep our eye on the water and the wine.
 - a. You probably noticed that the water was referred to as being for purification
 - i. The religious and social traditions of the time had very distinct rules about activities that would make someone “unclean” and then about the process to be “purified” once more and thus become clean.
 - ii. Those who were “unclean” could not mingle with others, to prevent them from contaminating those who were “purified”

- iii. Well, here we have today a modern version of that: we're wearing masks and physically distancing one from another, not quite because we're "unclean" but so that we don't unintentionally give each other this very sneaky virus
 - iv. So the water for purification was not only to make people "clean" – but think of this water also as the tool needed so someone would be reconnected to community after being in isolation
 - b. The wine had specific meaning too. Wine was for expressing joy
 - i. In the poetry of the psalms and of the prophets, drinking wine was meant to gladden the heart
 - ii. In the traditional celebration of Passover, when Jews remember liberation from Egyptian slavery, to show that the joy of liberation represented by a full cup of wine is not yet complete, they dip a finger into their glass of wine at a moment in the meal to take out a few drops of wine to show their joy is diminished by ongoing grief and suffering.
 - iii. Oh and don't forget that Jesus enjoyed meals with folks, so much so that critics called Jesus a "glutton and a drunkard" (but really because he was not dining with "acceptable people" but rather ate and drank with sinners).
 - c. So, of all the ways in which Jesus could have made wine miraculously appear, he chooses to transform the water for purification, adding a layer of spiritual meaning to this ritual cleansing with water, to show that the work he would do would break down barriers between people and between God and humans.
 - d. What a joyful message! For the guests it mean the party could keep going. For Jesus, this wine meant community, love, and it was a foreshadowing of his sacrifice to offer grace and forgiveness to all!
 - e. But could he say it plain like that? OH NO! He had to be all obtuse and intense.
 - f. Mary understood. She had put him up to it.
 - g. The disciples were amazed by the sign and the passage says that in seeing this sign they believed in Jesus.
 - h. The guests enjoyed the outcome, praising the wine (even though only the servants and the disciples knew where it had come from!)
 - i. Can you imagine if word had gotten out that Jesus could do this party trick?
 - ii. But more importantly, consider that with a wink and a nod Jesus lets the servants, the people with the least power and influence in the room, he lets them in on the secret of what God was going to be up to.
 - iii. They understood the news that God's love was going to wash over all people not just for those with power and influence.
4. I rather like the notion of Jesus really enjoying a good party and knowing his wine, and with unmatched generosity, freely sharing not just the wine but the joy and community it represented.
 - a. I can imagine my teetotaler mom gasping at this sermon, but she would have agreed the example Jesus gave us was of bringing people closer to each other and to God
 - b. Our ministry of hospitality and fellowship as a church is as integral to our work as is our ministry of education, service and justice.
 - c. In fact, I would argue,

- i. it's not enough to serve without also offering genuine hospitality
 - ii. it's hollow to cry for justice without having fellowship with those who suffer injustice
5. This was Jesus' first sign. To turn water for cleansing to wine for rejoicing. To turn barriers into bridges. To bring people closer to God. To bring them together for community. And for a bit of fun. And the people who saw this believed in him.

Questions for reflection

1. Share a story of a time of fellowship / party when you felt social barriers being torn down and people came together in a genuine way.
2. Jesus' response to his mother's request about the wine seems abrupt, even tense. What do you think is going on here?
3. What would happen if churches served those in need or advocated for justice while at the same time prioritizing fellowship and community-building with folk supported by those ministries?

Sources:

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