Sermon for The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Delivered at Christ Episcopal Church in Los Altos, CA on Sunday, January 20, 2019

Text: John 2:1-11

Title: New wine, new way

I’d like you to take a moment and think about the most outlandish, the most ridiculous, the most wonderful, fantastic, breathtaking thing you’ve ever seen at a wedding. Something wild. Something wonderful. Something, well, maybe a little weird. Here’s what comes to mind for me.

About eight years ago, a close friend from childhood got married in San Francisco City Hall. The wedding was gorgeous. Class upon class. No expense spared. Beautiful flowers. Designer gowns. The whole nine yards. And as a nod to the creativity of the betrotheds and their love of music, arriving guests received a program and a kazoo engraved with the couple’s names. At the end of the ceremony, after they had said “I do” and shared that classic kiss, we were all invited to join the mini-professional-symphony in kazoosing “All you need is love” as the newly married couple left the rotunda. It was silly and delightful and so them.

Or this. Almost ten years ago I attended the wedding of our new Governor, Gavin Newsom, and his wife, Jennifer. The festivities took place at Jen’s family’s ranch in Montana, rustic and stunning and very Legends of the Fall. Several platforms were built in the fields along a meandering stream, one for the ceremony, several for the dinner, more for the dancing. It was hot and humid, the air itself aglow in the early evening light, when we all gathered in the field, Gavin waiting expectantly at front, and just then Jen made an appearance in distance in a horse drawn carriage which eventually delivered her right to top of the aisle. It was not the stuff of movies so much as the stuff of fairy tales.

Or this. Another urban wedding, and this time the couple had to figure out how to get their guests from the ceremony to the reception site a few blocks away, so after the joyful, exuberant, incredible service itself, a mini marching band led a few hundred people on an impromptu parade, the best man dressed in a ridiculous long coat and top hat, faux-conducting across busy intersections while managing to keep time as the trombone, tuba, trumpet and others announced for the world their good news and safely delivered us to the land of milk and honey, or at least top shelf scotch.
Or this, perhaps my favorite. It was the first wedding I officiated as an ordinated person and, as seems typical for me, it was complicated. I was only a Deacon. I was six months pregnant. The wedding was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I needed permission from the local Bishop to preside, permission usually reserved for priests. Oh, and my step-brother and his bride to be, Kari, are both Jewish. But, all those hurdles mounted, in a turquoise blue maternity dress, no collar, and some rockin’ cowgirl boots, chanting Hebrew and trying to keep my cool, the two became husband and wife. The ceremony and the party were Southwestern-chic. Country-classic. Great food from a taco truck and even better music. And as the dancing went on well into the night, the courtyard of the western-style hotel lit by strung lights and the stars themselves, the sky suddenly erupted in fireworks. It was as good as - no better than - the grand finale on the Fourth of July. You could see the look of surprise and delight on Kari’s face as she turned toward Dave. A look that said, “I can’t believe you did this,” as she drew him close and rested her head on his chest. And Dave smiled, ecstatic, looking up at the sky, aglow in reds and purples and golds, before leaning down to kiss Kari long and slow, finally saying loud enough for everyone to hear, “Kari, I love you. And I can’t wait to spend my life with you. But I have no idea where those fireworks came from.”

Perhaps this is what it was like for the bridegroom in Cana when the steward tasted the water-turned-wine and complimented him on reserving the finest label for late in the night, saving the best for last. We don’t know what he said – John leaves that part of the story out – but maybe it was something like, “I do care for my guests. And I want you all to have a wonderful time tonight. But I have no idea where that wine came from.”

Today’s Gospel recounts an outlandish, ridiculous, wonderful, fantastic, breathtaking miracle, one that seems simultaneously over the top and somehow beneath God. Water into wine? Really? A party trick? That’s you’re first miracle, Jesus? Indeed, it is: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” Epiphany is a season in which we pay particular attention to how and where Jesus revealed his glory to those around him in his earthly life, partially to remember those stories but also to practice the noticing for ourselves: to make ourselves ready to see Jesus revealing his glory in our own lives. What does this look like? What form does it take, when God chooses, out of God’s infinite freedom, to draw near to us, share life with us, save us? Would we recognize it unfolding right in front of us? Would we know what to look for? Would we notice?
The wedding at Cana is instructive in this regard because many of the details are so familiar. We’ve all joined friends and family at a big wedding. We’ve all had a parent make outlandish requests of us, and ride right over our protests. We’ve all worried about the wine – or some other offering – running low. But there’s one detail that is likely unfamiliar, which we might be prone to miss, and that is the intended use of the jars. When Mary notices that the wine has given out, and coerces Jesus (as only a mother can) into helping, John takes the time to tell us that Jesus didn’t just fill any vessel with water and turn it into wine. No. Standing nearby are “six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.”

Purity, along with sacrifice, was a primary concern for Judaism in the time of Jesus. The people of ancient Israel understood a whole host of activities to make a person unclean, including everything from eating certain foods and menstruating to touching a dead body. Certain activities also required cleansing oneself even when there was no obvious impurity at hand, just in case. A kind of ritual prophylaxis. Remember that in this time there were not local synagogues on every corner. The only edifice dedicated to God was the Temple, standing tall and proud at a great distance in Jerusalem. So great a distance that most people only went there at most once a year to offer sacrifice. The rest of their faith was lived, practiced, marked in daily life, in homes and the fields, the kitchen table and the bedroom, with purity being at the heart of these regular and highly ordered daily devotions.

Because keeping oneself pure was essential, and because the sources of impurity were so many and varied as to be unavoidable, water and jars and prayers were always on hand to purify those in need of cleansing. Those who had been defiled. Those who had become otherwise unacceptable. At the heart of this whole complicated exercise was the notion that impurity separated us from God, and that only by being purified were we made acceptable in God’s eyes.

So Jesus fills jars intended for this purpose with water, and he turns it into the most exquisite Pinot Noir you’ve ever tasted. And here’s the kicker. Jesus is not simply transforming the water but also transforming the system it represents. With this little party trick, Jesus does so much more than ensure the party will go all night: he rejects the notion that our failures, our defilements, or our brokenness could keep us from God. He rejects the idea that there is anything in life we could touch or do or eat that would make us untouchable, unlovable, in God’s eyes. He rejects the idea, even, that our relationship with God is primarily about something we do or accomplish or earn. It is, instead, Jesus reveals, about something God does. We do not need to
perfect or pure to draw near to God. We do not need to enact our own transformation. We only need to enjoy the transformations God is already undertaking. God is already drawing near to us, no matter our defilement or degradation, our shame and our shadows, no matter our qualifications or cleanliness. It turns out a relationship with God is just not about our being ready or worthy or deserving. It’s not even about our being good. It’s about God being good – SO good that there is nothing we could do that would make the water in those six stone jars ever necessary again. Might as well use them for better purposes, Jesus figures.

There is a tension in our tradition around this truth, often articulated along these lines: if God is the mover, the lover, the creator, if God is always and already drawing near, then does it even matter what we do? How we live? The choices we make? Does it matter that we pray? That we celebrate the sacraments? Does it matter that we live justly and walk humbly with our God? If God’s so great and we’re all set anyway, what’s the point? Of course, the further you go down this train of thought, the more it reveals itself to be a rather immature line of inquiry, and still very much rooted in a kind of tit for tat theology. As if the only reason we ever do anything is to get something in return. As though the most important matters in life and death are that shallow.

Of course, it matters! Because God is drawing near, but we are always free to turn away. God is drawing near, but if we are not attentive we can miss the signs. God is drawing near, offering us the great gift of freedom and love and life in its fullness, but it is up to us to receive the gift. To accept it. To relish it. The miracle at Cana reveals so much about the nature of God and the nature of our relationship with God, highlighting God’s abundance and exuberance, God’s surprising and stunning ways. So when you bump up against something in the world or in yourself that seems cold and rigid, rule-bound and restrictive, something small and scarce, that says “there is not enough” or “better hold some back,” you can be sure you’ve strayed far from home. There’s just nothing of that God’s glory, revealed at Cana.

I’ve been watching a lot of Disney movies lately (naturally, with two kids at home), and in them – at least the classic ones – the wedding always seems to come at the end. The whole story builds up to it: the kiss, the marriage, the happily ever after. But here, today, we are just at the start of Jesus’ ministry. The wedding is not the end of the story but the beginning. It is not the end goal but the setting of the scene for everything that is yet to come. We don’t have to wait anxiously, wondering if everything will work out. The great good thing has already happened. It is our starting point. Here, in the beginning, Jesus reveals to his friends, to everyone with eyes to
see, God’s wild generosity, radical hospitality, abundant love. That ours is a God who loves no matter what. A God who overflows with goodness. A God who wants to celebrate with us, not just for a night but all eternity.

And everything that is yet to come – Jesus’ entire life, all his parables, his life and death and resurrection, his ascension and the coming of the Spirit, the life of the Church and our life together as the mystical body of Christ, your birth, your heartaches, your longings, your love, they are the rest of the story, in and through which God promises to reveal more of the same. After all, his new wine, this new way, will never fail. Thanks be to God. Amen.