

Sermon: January 10, 2016 John 2: 1-11
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

The season of Epiphany is a time of exploration and discovery, like the Magi who followed the star to a new source of illumination and hope. It is also a season of guidance, recalling the guidance they got from the star and from an angel warning them about King Herod; and sometimes the guides come from unexpected places.

This week's gospel reading is from the 2nd chapter of John, the familiar yet profoundly unusual story of The Wedding at Cana, the first miracle story in the gospel of John. Set rather ominously on the third day of Jesus' ministry, every part of this story seems a bit off. It's as if the writer had jotted down the elements of this story on file cards, then stumbled on the way to their writing desk, ending up with the cards shuffled and jumbled in a different order than initially intended. Or is it written in a kind of code, or a literary form like a haiku or an acrostic that I'm not seeing or understanding? Or did John intend it as a kind of farce or lampoon, intentionally setting up dialogue where questions are avoided or evaded, culminating with a miracle in which nobody was cured, raised or saved. If there were ever a Biblical story where I needed a guide, this would be the one.

The guide I found is no less than the great religious reformer Martin Luther. In the year 1525, Luther preached a sermon on John 2: 1-11, consisting of a mere 39 points which would likely have lasted just under an hour. Some of his points – like his contrasting of Judaism and Christianity (point 27), or his fairly detailed description of what kind of dancing might be allowable at a wedding feast (point 11)– are best off left in 1525, but he made some points that really brought me closer to this text, and I hope that his guidance works for you, too.

I. Why is this Mary's business?

One of the strangest parts of the story, is the fact that Jesus' mother Mary, a guest at a wedding feast, feels compelled to solve this problem. From my tiny knowledge of middle-eastern culture this has always struck me as a potentially huge affront to the family, this guest meddling in things. But hear what Luther (point 2) has to say on this:

"[Christ's] mother is present as the one arranging the wedding, the parties married being apparently her poor relatives or neighbors, and she being compelled to act as the bride's mother... Christ lived up to his doctrine, not going to the rich, but to the poor...[and] honoring them with a miracle."

So a social cue that I'd completely missed in this story, is the fact that there is one circumstance that would make it permissible for Mary to concern herself with the lack of wine – that being, a family related to her by blood or proximity who were too poor to look after this themselves. I'd always thought of the wine being tapped out due to poor management, but it could be that the wine ran out about the same time that the money did... and Jesus wades in to the fray to show in a tangible way, that eternal abundance is in store for those who are currently at the bottom of the heap.

II. The indirect question

The next odd bit of this scripture is the rather passive-aggressive manner that Mary tells Jesus about the wine situation, i.e. that there is none. She doesn't come right out and say, "son, we're out of wine, can you help?" she just says that they're out of wine, dropping it rather fully in his lap. Again, Martin Luther sees more in this than I do and I'm thankful for it. In essence, he takes a small step back from the story to see it at another level, and sees here a pattern for how we pray. Do we make demands, or do we name situations of concern and trust in the healing power of the holy? Luther says this (point 14): "This you observe in the case of his mother. She feels the need and tells him of it, desiring his help and counsel in a humble and polite request. For she does not say: My dear son, furnish us with wine, but: 'They have no wine.' Thus she merely touches his kindness, of which she is fully assured. As though she would say...there is no need of my asking, I will only tell him what is lacking, and he will of his own accord do more than one could ask. This is the way of faith...it makes bold to bring its petition and to present its need."

While stated in a very old-fashioned way, Luther nudges us toward a really important transition in our practice of prayer. One of the places where Christianity gets slammed in our time and place, is the notion that we function with a kind of Santa Claus God: we make our list, God checks it twice, the naughty are

turned down and the nice are rewarded. And some 500 years ago, Luther was already saying, y'know, in prayer it is important to say what's on our mind and what our hopes are...and then to trust that God's light will shine. When we pray, we strive to align our hearts with the loving, healing heart of a gracious and reconciling God, and when we speak our truth – and then wait and listen – we enter into that space where we are truly saying, “thy will be done.” Our prayers are an indication of trust and attention and intention, entrusted to the grace of God, and I thank Martin Luther for reminding me of this.

III. A son's disrespect?

Once Mary has made her request, perhaps the biggest problem in this scripture emerges: the curt, bordering-on-disrespectful response from Jesus to his mother. Much as the scriptures (and our first hymn today) encourage us to keep broadening our understanding of family, so that every living being is considered our kin, when Jesus refers to Mary as “woman” you can just about hear the music stop and all eyes at the party focus in on them. You just don't talk to your Mom that way, then or now.

And here, Luther speaks bluntly and in some detail about how difficult our life of faith can be when God seems to go as silent as Jesus did when he tuned out his mother's request (points 15 - 18): “how unkindly he turns away the humble request of his mother who addresses him with such great confidence... by his refusal making the need greater and more distressing than it was before she came to him with her request. Now observe the nature of faith... It feels its need [and yet] God turns against it like a stranger and does not recognize it....

“If Christ's mother had allowed his harsh words to frighten her she would have gone away silently and displeased; but in ordering the servants to do what he might tell them she proves that she ... still expects of him nothing but kindness. Hence the highest thought in this Gospel lesson, and it must ever be kept in mind, is, that we honor God as being good and gracious, even if he acts and speaks otherwise, and all our understanding and feeling be otherwise.”

I am struck by the edgy honesty of these words. Jesus did snub Mary, and rather than soft-selling that or saying it didn't happen, Luther acknowledges that there are times in everyone's religious life when it feels as if God has turned away. Dr. Robert H Schuller quipped many years ago, “there are four possible answers to prayer: yes; no; not yet; and, you've got to be kidding” and Luther's words have a bit of that sentiment as well. Part of the life of faith is the development of resilience, the ability to keep on keeping on, even when the light grows dim and it feels like we're working against God. We keep working, keep planning, keep caring for others and allowing others to care for us. We keep trusting even when it's bleak, with faith telling us that the light will emerge again.

For those of you keeping score, I have so far touched on eight of Luther's points on this gospel reading, so only 31 more to go! While there are many strong points among those 31, I'm only going to deal with one more this morning.

IV. Water into wine

It's impossible to say we've engaged this scripture at all if we haven't dealt with “water into wine,” the actual miracle at the middle of this scripture. The transformation of six tall vessels of ritual wash-water into the finest of wines is one of those stories where (1) society in general has heard the punch line and (2) has judged Christianity as a whole to be completely unscientific and ridiculous because our sacred story includes such a thing.

And fair enough: as Christians we haven't done a great job at getting the word out that there's more than one way to believe that a scripture has meaning for you – there's the small-t truth about whether something happened exactly as written, and the big-T truth about what it demonstrates about the human condition. And to be honest, I don't have any problem with the miracle stories in John's gospel being both small t and big T true, because not everything in life has a nice linear answer. But from his vantage point in the year 1525, here is some of what Luther saw in these huge vessels of water being transformed into fine wine (point 33):

“the consoling Gospel turns the water into wine....It is an excellent thing, and delectable, that the Law is so deep and high, so holy and righteous and good, and demands things so great; and it is loved and lauded for making so many and such great demands. This is because the heart now has in Christ all that the Law demands, and it would be sorry indeed if it demanded less. Behold, thus the Law is delightful

now...for it lives in the heart by the Spirit. Water no longer is in the pots, it has turned to wine, it is passed to the guest, it is consumed, and has made the heart glad.”

Although there are other places in his interpretation where he is less charitable toward the Hebrew scriptures upon which our Christian faith rests, here Luther draws a grand picture of thankfulness for our forebears in the faith. Water into wine is a great thing, but it needs a vessel to hold it – the Jewish traditions that Jesus and his disciples all grew up with. Yes, there is the transformation from drab water to lively wine but Luther reminds me that without the vessels of tradition, passed along from our Jewish ancestors in faith, this miracle doesn't even get started.

Martin Luther has not cured all of my wonderings about this scripture reading, but he's given me food for thought and I hope that has been the case for you as well. While I admit that today's material was pretty old-fashioned, one of the things I love about our Christian story is the way it continues to unfold across the ages and across the continents. As we look back at our traditions – whether expressed in the worship life of this congregation in 1891, or the writings of Martin Luther in 1525 – we meet people striving to find God's presence in their daily lives. There have been some great advances in scholarship in recent decades, especially when feminist scholars and the Churches of the southern hemisphere have had their full say, but I am struck by how often the thought adjustments I need to make come from “way back when” in our family of faith, frequently by people like Luther who put everything on the line to have their say.

As you engage life with open eyes, open ears and an open heart, may you find wise and varied guides for your journey to the love and life of Christ. Amen.

Resources cited:

<http://www.biography.com/people/martin-luther-9389283#excommunication>

<http://www.lectionarycentral.com/epiphany2/Luthergospel.html>

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