

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 2: 1-12

John's gospel contains the most theology, meaning he is not just telling us stories about Jesus but explaining who Jesus is in the calculus of God's nature and plans. He is prone to explain; to connect the dots. For example, his gospel account opens not with a story about how Jesus came to be born. He opens with this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." And sometimes when we hear Jesus speak in John's account, he speaks in very theological ways. Such as his prayer for the disciples in John 17 where he says: "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed."

John's gospel is considered the latest. It has more of a retrospective sense of what it all means, of Jesus' nature, of why Jesus had to go through the grueling events of Holy Week. Jesus has a more developed sense of what he came to do. I mention this characteristic of John's gospel because what I have come to find interesting about this gospel is that John pairs this theological and explanatory tendency with these very detailed relatable stories of people who encounter Jesus. So, if we were to wonder how someone like us, in their humanity, caught up in life's dilemmas, embedded in a culture, how such a person might encounter and get involved with the messiah who was there when the world began, and how Jesus might react or respond to us, John gives us very compelling stories.

These stories include Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, and the Samaritan woman at the well, and the disciples with Jesus in the storm, and the man born blind, and Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and Peter on the shore of Galilee in his discouragement. So, while John is prone to tell us what it all means as he leans towards theology and abstraction, he balances it with these stories about people fully embedded in the world as they encounter Jesus. This is fitting because we aren't changed because we know something as a principle or an abstraction. We are changed because we encounter Christ in the muddy details of our lives. We are changed by love, help, and acts of dignity and grace.

So, after John opens his account about the eternal Word made flesh in very theological language and starts to get into the stories of Jesus, the first miracle that

Jesus performs comes in John 2 at the wedding at Cana. John tells us that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

It is an odd first miracle, an odd way to reveal his glory. To have John 1 with its grand introduction about Jesus being there at the beginning of time, and of light coming into the world, and calling his first disciples, and now the first real crisis that Jesus has come to rescue from is a shortage of wine, and that the guests at a wedding banquet might have to go home only half drunk.

Furthermore, it is also odd that Mary is the one to prod him to intervene, and he resists at first, probably with a touch of rudeness. “Woman,” he addresses her, “what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” And yet, he does respond. He does intervene as Mary had wanted him to do. Why does he intervene? Why this story? And as a first sign that Jesus performs, what does it tell us about who Jesus is, what does it indicate about things to come, about what Jesus’ ministry will be about?

My wife has a special liking for this story and has spent much time pondering it over the years. And because I could not convince her to preach for me this morning, I shall pilfer some of her insights. Holly takes great interest in the fact that Mary is the one who recognizes the problem and who implores Jesus to do something. And while Jesus had not planned to intervene, he seems to respond to his mother. And why is Mary concerned, and why does she implore Jesus to act?

It should be said that the real crisis here is not so much a shortage of wine as it is about a wedding that is about to end in shame and embarrassment. There is a social crisis brewing, like having dinner guests over only to burn the chicken and have the plumbing back up while everybody leaves hungry and grossed out and muttering jokes under their breath. A young couple’s wedding is about to become an embarrassment, to go from a joyful honor to an embarrassment. That is the significance of the moment. It is an honor-shame culture, a culture where hosting and great banquets are top-priority things. You would never host a wedding banquet of that scale without adequate plans or provisions.

And this is Holly’s take on the story. Mary sees this brewing because she was once a young girl who dreamed of the perfect wedding day, all the traditions executed, and families proud and glowing. But for Mary, all that went a-rye and devolved into shame, scandal, rumor. She was a young girl whose betrothal almost got called off by Joseph when she came to be with child before the culmination of their

wedding. She knew what it was like to be scoffed at, talked about, and looked down upon.

You see, that is the beauty of John's gospel, is that for all his grand commentary on Jesus' life and his death and resurrection, the grace of God is encountered by people in the course of their lives, their struggles, their questions, their predicaments, their encounters with Christ. For John, whether you are religious or irreligious, one can and must still encounter Christ; one can and must discover grace. Jesus cares about our wounds and experiences.

I chose Hirschfield's poem this morning for this reason. She names something in common with all of us, a type of humble confession. As much as we might try to separate ourselves from others by appealing to one category or another or see ourselves as better than others, it is in the place of our humility that we encounter Christ. And so, at the start of Jesus' ministry is a social event in the lives of a young couple that is about to go wrong; their families are about to be ashamed and embarrassed. And out of compassion and empathy towards their predicament, Mary implores, and Jesus intervenes.

And in the course of Jesus intervening, another dynamic is clear. Jesus does not introduce anything that isn't present or discard anything already present. But he transforms it all.

This is another observation of my wife's, and perhaps the real reason John tells this story at the start of Jesus' ministry. You see, in Jesus' cultural and religious context, there is a distinction between honorable things and shameful things. You lift up the honorable and push away the shameful things. There is a distinction between the clean things and the unclean. You embrace the clean and do away with or push away the unclean. The clean and honorable are cherished and embraced and belong in God's presence, and the shameful and unclean do not. Simple as that. People got sorted the same way. Clean people worship in the temple, the unclean outside of the village or contained in their homes.

But what Jesus does in this story is not to push away or do away with the shameful or unclean, but to transform it. He instructs the servants to take the water jars there for ritual cleaning, meaning it is water that has taken on the uncleanness of the guests in washing their feet and now is to be discarded. But Jesus doesn't discard this unclean water nor wash the dirty jars. He changes it, transforms it into something good and suitable and honorable and celebrated.

“Fill the jars with water,” Jesus instructs the servants. And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” Imagine being one of the servants who is delivering what he thinks is tainted water to the chief steward, wondering what is going to happen to him, only to realize that it has become fine wine. Jesus transforms the story about a couple and their families whose day was about to end in shame.

Whether you are a respected Pharisee like Nicodemus, or a Samaritan woman with a checkered history, or close friend of Jesus like Lazarus, or a man born blind and considered sinful from birth, Jesus can transform, redeeming the shameful things, making them honorable, transforming the unclean into clean.

This is the first miracle. It is a story that foretells what is coming after, offering some interpretive key to the larger story. And as this gospel continues, Jesus will dignify the shamed, will give the ostracized dignity. He will transform the broken, he will die to make the sinful holy, the unclean clean, the shamed dignified, the sinful forgiven. Indeed, this surprising story is perhaps a fitting opening – about Jesus’ compassion for ordinary folks, for his proclivity to redeem and transform, rather than push away or condemn.

In John’s gospel, the old can be born anew, the sinful can go and sin no more, the blind can come to see, the one who messes up, like Peter, can be forgiven and start anew. Things don’t get discarded, they become transformed, changed, redeemed for good.

It makes me wonder, here at the start of Lent, what is it in our own stories that is yet to be redeemed or transformed? What is it that is still feels like shame and disappointment, like disgrace? If Jesus can redeem the shameful and embarrassing and unclean, What in us is yet to be redeemed and transformed? If dirty water can become wine, if the old can be born anew, then what about us? Perhaps the story is not over yet.

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

And all God’s people said... Amen.

The Wedding at Cana

2 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. ⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.