

*Sermon for 2 Epiphany, Year C*

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*Holy Nativity, Plano*

*14 January, 2007*

In today's Gospel, we find ourselves at the very beginning of Jesus' active ministry. In John's Gospel, we have been through his baptism by John the Baptist, and several disciples have begun to follow him. And yet, there still has not been a *sign*, something that simply must have been the work of divine power. But John has witnessed to his identity and Nathanael has even called him the King of Israel. So there is now a band of disciples hanging out with him.

Now Jesus' mother is invited to a wedding at Cana, about 7 or 8 miles from Nazareth. This wouldn't be just a half-day affair hosted by one (or even two) families. This was probably an event that lasted several days, and the entire community was expected to contribute. For example, the guests would have brought wine for the festivities. This is a culture that takes marriage seriously and celebrates it together! Think of it as an extended block party with a serious purpose.

Perhaps as a favor to his mother, Jesus and his motley band of disciples are invited to the party. But there isn't enough wine for everyone. They run out. This is a potentially embarrassing social situation. Besides, it might end the party before we have all properly celebrated the new marriage. And in the midst of this crisis, into the breach steps the Jewish woman who is the first and best example of Christian discipleship.

Now watch and learn. When the wine runs out, she goes to Jesus and says, “They have no wine.” It is a statement of fact, and it is a statement of need. Very simple; very straightforward. She obviously thinks that he could do something about this situation if he chose. And this is the exact same posture that is proper to any of us when approaching Jesus. Take your problem to him. Make it simple and straightforward. And trust that he can do something about it.

Jesus’ response is literally, “What is it to me and to you? My hour is not yet come.” That sounds negative, but it’s also incomprehensible. Who knows what he means by “my hour”? And he hasn’t actually said “no”. Only because we know the rest of the story do we know that the “hour” is his passion, cross, and resurrection. Everything that Jesus does, even his miracles, must be understood in the context of that “hour”, when he suffers death for us and conquers sin for us. It all points to that central mission. But there is no way for his mother to know all of that at the marriage feast in Cana.

So, not being sure what he means, she leaves the initiative with him. “Do whatever he tells you.” This also is a necessary ingredient in our prayers. When God seems unclear, when we are too ignorant to hear clearly what he’s saying to us, then we say, “Do what you will.” The temptation is always to try to control the situation. Not only do we take our problem to God, we also take him the solution that we think he needs to use. And then, when we don’t understand the response, we try to manipulate the outcome ourselves.

Mary doesn’t do that. Neither does Jesus. When he said, “What is it to me and to you?” he is showing us his deep humility. Here is the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity saying, “I don’t have any orders, here. Yes, they are out of wine. That is sad. But I am not called to just go around fixing everything without direction from the Father. How does this fit into the mission God has given me?”

When we are called to obedience, we are not called to something that Jesus didn't do. Even Jesus had to do what he was told. And he did. That's why he was without sin.

But when God does decide to intervene in a situation, he doesn't go halfway. As soon as we allow him the initiative, as soon as we let go of our own solutions and manipulations, he pours out blessing until the cup overflows. Here in this story, we may take that image in a more literal sense. Wherever they are having this conversation there were six big, standing jars. They each hold twenty or thirty gallons. And he tells the servants to fill them up with water. This is the other thing about prayer. When God finally does give you clear instructions, just do it. God's miracles usually require our obedience. What if Lazarus had refused to come out of his tomb? Or what if the man lowered through the roof on the pallet had refused to stand up and walk? Jesus says, "Fill the jars with water." And they do it.

So Jesus contributes not a few wineskins, not even a whole stack of skins, but 150 gallons (give or take) to the feast. And when the servants take the wine to the steward of the feast, he is amazed at the quality! This is the glory that is manifested to the disciples, who are watching this whole exchange. This is a sign, not only of God's power working through Jesus, but also of God's character. In response to this simple request of more wine to continue the feast, Jesus provides over a hundred gallons. And it's the best wine any of them have tasted so far. That is the mark of God's dealings with his people. Generous abundance, more than we knew ask for, better than we could have prayed.

And Jesus never touched the wine or the jars. It's his moment. He is manifesting his glory, performing his first sign. And he does it all through other people. He directs them. It's his power that accomplishes it. But it is their hands that fill the jars, that draw out the wine, that take it to the steward of the feast, that eventually serve it to the guests. This amazing outpouring of blessing is done without Jesus calling any attention to himself. It is not his "hour".

Now Jesus has a greater miracle; one which is just as amazingly gratuitous, just as full of blessing; one in which he is just as self-effacing. This miracle is ongoing. And it is one in which he pours out his blessing through other people. I speak of the miracle of the church.

In our reading from I Corinthians, Paul is speaking of the gifts and abilities that God pours out on his people by the Holy Spirit. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And this manifestation is not given in a cramped style, but abundantly, overflowing. Some receive miraculous "words" of wisdom or knowledge. Some receive a special gift of faith. Some receive the ability to heal, or work miracles, or prophesy, or deal with the spiritual realm directly, or speak in unknown languages, or interpret prophecies given that way. Like the 150 gallons of wine, this miracle is "over the top". We might not even really want to be a part of such a thing. But St. Paul expects this sort of thing in any church, in any community of people who are following Jesus.

This is what it means to be the church. Not that we are suddenly going to start rolling in the aisles on Sunday mornings (although that might be good for some of you). I mean that we ought to expect this sort of miraculous intervention in our lives by the Holy Spirit. As extraordinary as it may seem, it ought to be an ordinary thing for us. Because we are a part of the miraculous body of Christ. And he intends, for whatever reason, to accomplish his will through us. We are his servants bearing cups of miracle to each other and to the world. And I'm not

speaking of some anemic sort of so-called miracle of cheering people up. I'm talking about the full-blooded kind of miracles of ... well ... prophesying, and healing, and having extraordinary faith, and speaking in languages we don't understand, and driving out evil spirits, and freeing people from their sins.

It is up to him to provide the good wine. It is up to us to do as we're asked.