

“The Son of God Walks into a Party....”

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Text: John 2: 1 - 12

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“The Son of God walks into a party....” It almost sounds like the beginning of a joke, doesn’t it? But you could read this passage like a comedy. The host of a wedding reception runs out of wine. Crisis! Mary approaches her son and says in a stage whisper, “they’ve run out of wine!” Nudge nudge, wink wink. Jesus responds, saying “What’s that to me? My powers aren’t for parlour tricks.” Mary, ignoring her son’s push-back comments, tells the servants, “do what he asks of you”, expecting Jesus to be the dutiful son, nonetheless. Jesus rolls his eyes and says with exasperation, “Fine! Fill those jars with water....” The crisis is averted, the party goes on and the newlyweds live happily ever after. The end. I don’t think that is how John would have us read this story. But how to read this story is a real question because we are given so little guidance by John to understand what we should take from it. What is John trying to say to us by including this story in his gospel?

If we give the story a quick, superficial reading, it can appear to be no more than a story of a simple miracle that so impressed his early followers that their belief in him was strengthened. But this story is telling us far more than that, for every element of the story is symbolically rich with meaning. We understand from the gospel of Mark that Jesus’ first, simple summary of his message was “the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Accept the Good News and repent.” John doesn’t share these words in his gospel, but the story of the wedding feast at Cana illustrates Jesus’ simple sermon summary completely.

First, Jesus arrives and finds people in need. The wine had run out at the wedding festivities. Given that in Jesus’ day a wedding celebration could last as long as a week (!) not having wine was indeed a significant social crisis for the hosts. Zoom out to the bigger story of Jesus’ life and ministry: God in love sent the Son to a hurting world in need. Second, in response to Mary’s indirect but not-so-subtle hint for Jesus to fix the situation, we hear a mildly indignant Jesus push back at his mother’s request. “Woman, what is that to me? My hour has not yet come.” My hour has not yet come. Apparently—in Jesus’ mind—there was a plan / schedule for his ministry, and the time of that plan’s launch had not yet arrived. The performance of miracles was to be a part of that launch. Zoom out again: there was purpose and plan for the Son of God coming among us. Third, Jesus preempted his own schedule. Despite what he just said—“my time has not yet come”—he acted anyways. Compassion and care won out over the plan and Jesus responded to a need as simple and as small as a party that had run out of wine. Again, the big picture of Jesus’ story: compassion and grace are the driving motives for Jesus’ ministry. Fourth, he met the need by making wine, but not just any wine. If guests comes to my home for dinner and bring TWO bottles of wine, I am surprised and pleased! What did Jesus do? The story says he created the equivalent of 100 to 150 bottles of wine! And not just any wine, but fine wine. Again, the big picture of Jesus’ story: Jesus gives purposefully, graciously, abundantly, wonderfully. And the

response of the wedding guests would have been the same as anyone else who received Jesus' help: gratitude and joy! The party—as is life itself—made better by Jesus' presence in it.

John, as this gospel's editor, makes his own observation at the end of this story: "This was the first of the signs given by Jesus." In terms of today's story, a sign is an event whose occurrence indicates the probable presence of something else. For example, we would say that snowdrops pushing up through the snow is a sign that spring is just around the corner. Of the four gospels, John makes the most of emphasizing Jesus' miracles as "signs". Starting small with the turning of water into wine, building in an ever more dramatic way until finally we hear about the final sign: the resurrection of Lazarus after three days in the grave. So, Jesus miracles are signs of what? Let's go back to that essential message of Jesus' preaching: the Kingdom of God has come close. Like the snowdrops, these miracles were to help observers believe the truth of Jesus words, to appreciate that the Kingdom of God had come closer. The signs were to encourage people believe and accept this new reality, and then let this understanding change the way they lived their lives. Again, Jesus' simple gospel message: "the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Accept this Good News and repent."

I think history teaches us that this pattern has continued the same down through the ages. Post Easter we certainly speak of Christ as King...that Easter has ushered in a new era under God. But while Christ reigns over all now, as we look around our world we see that so much of the world does not conform to that reign. It can appear that the Kingdom of God has only come closer...still not fully here yet. Scripture suggests this as well, saying things like: this age will come to an end, that Christ will return, that at the end of this age God will create a new heaven and earth, that God will walk among people like in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. So, until then, it may still look to us like the Kingdom of God has come close. And like those people who saw Jesus in action, we too will have to rely on signs that this closeness of the Kingdom of God is actually true. And that the evidence for this truth are still signs: an experience that indicates to us the probable presence of something else—that the Kingdom of God is here. If, like the early followers of Jesus at that wedding we too want to believe with greater certainty, then we need to look for those signs that point to the reality that the Kingdom has indeed come close.

So what could be signs for us that the Kingdom of God is here? I think they broadly fall into two groups. The one group depends on how we look at the world and the other group depends on how we live in the world. How we look at the world. If we believe God influences the life of the world and individual lives, then those moments—when we notice them—are signs. Our sister denomination in the Reformed family of Christianity—the Christian Reformed Church—has a doctrine they call common grace. It is the idea that whenever we experience goodness, beauty, virtue, excellence in the world, that the hand of God to some degree has made that happen. I like that perspective because it prompts us to imagine the activity of God. So when I see tulips pushing up through snow in a Calgary spring I feel wonder for God and God's creation and I am thankful. When I saw last week some restaurant owners handing out free hot meals to laid off American government workers I see a sign that points to God's kingdom of goodness...a pointer to how God would have the whole world live. It's a perspective—a point of view. If,

like Jesus followers at the wedding banquet, we see these things as pointers to the glory of God, then like them our own faith will become more reassured.

It's a similar thing when it comes to prayer. In prayer we commonly lift our concerns up to God in hope that the concerns will be addressed. If the circumstance we prayed about improves, do we take that as God's answer to prayer?...As a sign that the Kingdom of God has come near? A relative of mine experienced the onset of physical pain and so went to her doctor. The doctor said "the symptoms seem to point to a gall bladder problem but maybe not." She was referred to a specialist, some scans were taken. The specialist said, we think it might be Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma (a form of cancer). We were all very worried. We prayed. Doctors performed surgery. After, they reported that they found a clump of tissue that had lost its blood supply and died as a consequence. What they found during surgery looked little like the scans taken days earlier. It appears that something had happened to this tissue in the days just prior to the surgery. The doctor said that this is not a common thing but it does happen. But the question I struggled with was "was this an answer to prayer?" We believe that God answers prayer. So was this a sign that the Kingdom of God is near. Did this point to the glory of God in action? Now, if the surgeon had found a small business card in there that said "Courtesy of God. You are welcome!" it would be so easy to attribute this mystery to God. Years later I am still not fully convinced that it was our family's own personal answer to prayer. But the mystery and the coincidence of it all won't let me go. And because it won't let me go I still entertain the notion that it might have been a "water into wine" moment for our family. And I find that even holding that as a possibility affirms my beliefs.

It was no different at the wedding. When the steward learned there was more wine he attributed it all to the bridegroom holding back the good stuff in a sneaky way to be a surprise for the guests! But for those early followers of Jesus, who were learning from Jesus that the Kingdom of God has come near. They looked at what happened...and the story says "and his followers believed in him." To take an experience of ours and attribute it in some way to God takes a leap of faith. But if we take that leap, then our experience becomes a sign, a pointer to something else being present. God. And will not our faith be stronger for it?

The other group of signs that the Kingdom of God is near is us and how we live. As we live as followers of Jesus we can be signs to others to help them see the possibility...perhaps even the probability that God has come close. We say faith comes to us as a gift of God, which suggests that in some way the faith we have is a small miracle, in and of itself. If we see our faith that way then that can reassure our belief. But when people see us living out that faith we become evidence for the existence of God just as much as water turning into wine.

At the beginning of John's account of Jesus he provided this story of a simple miracle. John brought his account of Jesus full circle in the final verse of his gospel. We read, "There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself, I suppose, would not hold all the books that would have to be written." The world could not hold all the books, for signs that the Kingdom of God is near have been more than we can count since the days John penned these words. It only takes our eyes to see them.