



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 19, 2025
ISAIAH 62:1-5; PSALM 36:5-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11; JOHN 2:1-11

WHAT KIND OF SIGN IS THIS?

John 2:1-11 [On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 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 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." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.]

Is this what we need today? There are days when our Gospel seems spot on, and other days when the thread connecting then and now is harder to see. I'm not sure we're up for what seems like a parlor trick. Surely there are pressing matters on our national and world stages that require a serious response. Who cares about Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding?

It meant something to those hosting the wedding. Let's start there. Weddings, then and now, are a time when we put on our best faces, when we hope that the pictures won't reflect the fault lines trembling just beneath the surface. In the ancient Near East, the ability to host a wedding feast was a matter of honor. Honor then meant what success means to us now. Running out of wine was a cause for shame. Some

scholars say that Jesus' action here is an attempt to remove shame, that he is serving a serious and dignified purpose – and therefore, it's OK to like this story, no matter how trivial it may seem in the light of say, war or ongoing racial injustice or the very real threats facing our trans and undocumented neighbors.

I suspect that was part of it. But he could have done it in a more restrained way. He doesn't just fill in with a few cases of Yellowtail or Barefoot Merlot. He provides more world-class wine than these folks will ever be able to drink on their own. We're told by John, our Gospel writer, that this strange moment is the first of Jesus' signs for those who know where to look. It reveals not just power but glory – the known, felt presence of God.

Where exactly is this glory? Turning water into wine – this is not about meeting basic needs or fulfilling some moral obligation. It's more fun, more joyous than that. Could it be that God truly cares about our enjoyment, our delight in the good things of this world – even as we suit up to resist its evil? Or even more astonishing, that God might actually delight in us?

Isaiah in today's first reading says just that. And it was as hard for his original audience to swallow as it is for us. Their shame in who they'd become as a nation was on full display. After boasting that they'd always be safe because they were the "city on a hill," they were humiliated and sent away from their homeland for decades. They'd kept hope alive by remembering what was. Yet the city they returned to looked nothing like their nostalgic dreams. The walls were still black with soot from fires set during the siege. Rebuilding would be hard, costly, painful work.

They didn't know where to start and weren't sure they felt like trying.

Imagine then hearing these words: "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord...You shall no more be termed Forsaken...You shall be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you." Delight isn't something we normally associate with God. Mercy and faithfulness, sure, but delight? It seems too naïve for God. We tend to think of God in more restrained terms – decidedly not like a giddy

newlywed on a wedding day. We know the fragility of that kind of love. Yet that's the image we're given. Honestly, that might be harder to picture than Jesus turning water into wine.

What do we do with such images – with a God who offers us the finest wine when we'd settle for water, who delights in us precisely when we feel the most vulnerable and exposed and unlovely? I've spent a while this week struggling with this imagery. As someone whose parents have been married three times each, I know all too well the imperfection of the metaphor. Newlyweds don't stay newlyweds forever. Over time, we see things in our partners that we couldn't have seen at first – things that aren't so delightful. We see ugly things in ourselves that we never would have admitted in the early years, even if we knew they were there. Couples with some years behind them can't pretend that it's all as lovely as they wanted it to be on their wedding day. How can this illusion-shattering love possibly reflect God's love or delight in us?

Well, it depends in part on how we define beauty and what we mean by delight. If

beauty demands no evidence of brokenness or change over time, then it is an unreachable standard and a hopeless fantasy. And if the joy of delight depends on instant success, then it is an illusion. But if the beauty God sees in us allows for things to be rebuilt after destruction and refashioned into a more textured, more complex whole, that holds the past gently alongside the present, then it's not such a stretch that God finds us beautiful. And if delight can be found as much in our persistence as in our results, then it's not naïve. My question for you today: Where in your life, in our country, in our world might you need to reclaim beauty and delight?

All this said, there's more to this wedding imagery than we originally thought. It points to the fact that our story with God is not over yet, and that the truth of God's love extends far beyond our nearest, admittedly scary horizon. And it reminds us that while a renewed and redeemed future is not inevitable, it is possible – if not in our time and strength, then certainly in God's. In the meantime, if you're still looking for a sign, then join us

here at this feast today before you suit up and resist tomorrow. Let the bread and wine, broken and beautiful, be your sign – the known, felt presence of the God who will never leave or forsake us, who delights

in us, and who knows exactly what we need. Amen.



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