

TEARS INTO LAUGHTER

CALL TO WORSHIP: Isaiah 55:1-3 (NIV)

*"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."*

OPENING PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, can it be true? That what we most need, what we long for cannot be bought, but only received as a gift from you? Why is it so hard to receive? On some level do we not feel we have earned or paid for it in "fair exchange?" Would we feel that we owed you something in return? That we are in your debt? We want to control our destinies Lord. To do otherwise is so terrifying, for in this world there is little worth entrusting our lives to. We have scant proof and even less evidence. Yet how can we gain that evidence if we cannot trust and act accordingly. So with a leap of faith we invite you into our hearts, our minds and souls and into your church. Prepare us to receive all you have to offer us this morning... Lord, help us to trust you. AMEN

SCRIPTURE READING:

^{NRS} **John 2:1** *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.*

SERMON: TEARS INTO LAUGHTER

It was a beautiful spring Saturday, a group of us had gathered at Cyndy Haug's gravesite at Pacific View cemetery on her birthday, two months after her passing. We were all pretty raw with the loss. While we were there we also saw the gravesite of Lorraine Ames, and we couldn't help thinking of Erin Terrieri who had passed just a year earlier. All three mothers with young children. Incredibly, vibrant women whom we lost to that cruel, heartless demon of cancer.

Well it was a heartbreaking afternoon and one of us, The Beloved Friend, who had been constantly by Cyndy's side through it all, was overcome with grief. It was the kind of grief that should never be experienced alone. So one of us suggested that we head over to El Ranchito and have a margarita. It seemed a bit incongruous, but upon further reflection, we thought that actually, it was exactly what we should do. Because, well...if you knew Cyndy...you knew she loved a good party. So there we were, the three of us, crammed knee to knee into the tiny, little two foot by three foot patio of the old El Ranchito restaurant, watching all the cars whizzing by on PCH, crying and drinking margaritas and talking about life, tragedy and what we really thought about God and Jesus. It was all pretty outrageous. And somewhere along the way, it became hard to distinguish the salt of our tears from the salt on the rims of the margarita glasses. And we found that instead of just crying, we were laughing so hard we were crying. We experienced something very powerful that day. In the midst of tremendous, grief, anger and helplessness, the three of us felt real joy.

Thus was born the catchphrase "Jesus and Margaritas." And every time in the future one of us might use it, the memory would be invoked and it never ceased to produce a big grin and a twinkle in our eyes. When I told the women who were with me that day about this sermon, each of them spoke about the power of the experience, and the Beloved Friend said that she was inconsolable that day and was amazed at what had happened.

The next time I was at El Ranchito, I was at their new, spacious digs having lunch and a margarita with another friend from church who had been in excruciating physical pain. As we went to leave the restaurant, she had a spasm and needed to sit it out in the bar near the exit. And I couldn't help but mention "Jesus and Margaritas." And so once again, the discussion worked its way around talking about Jesus and who we thought he was. We ended up sitting there for quite some time and I had to stop in the middle of the conversation because something had happened. Her face which was wracked with tears of pain had transformed into one beaming with joy. I asked her what had happened, that her countenance had actually changed and I hadn't seen her shift in her seat for quite some time. And through the biggest smile you could have imagined, she said "I know." "Jesus and Margaritas" had struck again.

When another friend was going through a very hard professional transition, you could understand why I would offer to take her over to El Ranchito for a margarita, because I told her I had this "Jesus and Margaritas" ministry and although I couldn't change water into wine, I've actually seen tears turn into laughter.

As I tried to understand what had happened in these two experiences, I realized that in both instances the discussion evolved naturally in an unexpected way. No one had any agendas, and there was a real honesty about what we *really* thought about Jesus. Jesus was approached as a human being or as theologians might put it “from below” and during our open wrestling with his identity, our opinions of him transcended our previous ideas and we transcended right along with him. A couple of biblical passages came to mind... from Matthew, “Wherever two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” and from Luke on the road to Emmaus, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened up scripture to us?”

I want to take a moment here to expand upon something that was mentioned earlier regarding, approaching Jesus “from below,” because I think the discussion about Christology is so important.

If I were to ask you about our scripture passage, some of you might have heard it and thought it was well, divine. You had no problems with the miracle, and you are able to see Jesus working out his divinity in this way.

Some of you may have wrestled with it. You wanted to believe in the miracle, but what you know about the world made it pretty hard to reconcile?

Some of you may have let the scripture reading just pass over your head and started drifting off thinking about what you were going to do when this service was over?

Some of you may have thought, oh come on, really, this can't possibly be true. At best it's a symbol or a metaphor. At worst it's first century propaganda or the magical thinking of antiquity

And some of you may have located yourselves within a combination of two or more of the above.

Welcome to Christology 101, the study of who Jesus was and what he did. There are two approaches of Christology, “from above” and “from below.” Christology “from above” refers to approaches that begin with the divinity and pre-existence of Christ as the Logos (the Word), as expressed in the first sections of the Gospel of John. Christology “from below” refers to approaches that begin with the human aspects and the ministry of Jesus and move towards his Divinity and the mystery of Incarnation.

These two approaches to Christology, “from above” and “from below” are both valid. One of my theology professors at seminary once pointed out an interesting observation, that people who approach “from below” can end up with a higher Christology than those who approach “from above” and those who begin “from above” can end up with Christology that is not that high. And we can observe this same spectrum in the New Testament, and in the Gospel of John. In our passage, we as readers are approaching the text “from above,” we have inside information, about who Jesus is from the magnificent prologue, verses one through eighteen, where God and the Word and transformed into the Father and the Son and this changes everything. The incarnation means that humans can see and hear and know God in ways never possible before.

The second thing we learn is that Jesus is not continuing in John the Baptist's ministry, he is going a different way. John was considered the last of the OT prophets and practiced denial and asceticism and the baptism of repentance, Jesus was something new and was more concerned with abundant life. The author of this gospel distinguishes Jesus' ministry from John's.

Next we hear about a few of the disciples leaving John to join Jesus and his movement. There are a few key phrases here, “come and see”, “follow me,” and “you will see greater things than these.” Lots of verbs. This gospel is about action. The characters in the text are on a journey of discovering who Jesus is and where he came from. Some get it and some don’t, but they are approaching it “from below.”

I have always found myself in the “from below” category. It is my belief that If God so longed for a closer relationship to his people that he revealed himself in the person of Jesus, who was I to distance Jesus by placing him as far out of reach possible. So I usually begin my approach to biblical texts from a human perspective, a human perspective with a very open mind. And from there greater things evolve, but I continue to find myself face to face with the same thing...MYSTERY. Things that are ultimately beyond my comprehension.

Well the poet John Keats said “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced – even a proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it.” And after my talking about the turning of water into wine, the Wedding at Cana intrigued me in a new and different way. I almost named this sermon “Jesus and Margaritas,” but I realized that what had happened actually had very little to do with the margaritas and everything to do with Jesus. El Ranchito and margaritas were real things, but like wedding banquets and wine, they had much greater significance.

The wedding banquet had great significance. It was the most joyful event in New Testament times and it was symbolic of God’s Kingdom and reign at the end of time. In the Old Testament the abundance of good wine is a sign of the joyous arrival of God’s new age as we can see in Amos and Joel, “New wine dripping from the mountains and flow from the hills.” Wine signified both joy and the inaugural act of God’s promised salvation.

Openings of the Gospels are important as they set the tone for the entire gospel and give you clues about the most crucial aspects. We heard earlier that chapter one explained how God and the Word had become Father and Son and that Jesus was forming a new ministry and a few of John’s disciples decided to follow him. And then, in chapter two, right at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus launches his public ministry *at a wedding banquet* and the miracle is about *wine*. If we bring it all together, *his opening salvo is to bring abundant life to his people and to convey God’s love for them*.

If you are looking for a baby Jesus or Jesus as a victim, you won’t find it in John. It’s as though Jesus is up at bat and he’s calling his shot and pointing over the heads of John, the Jewish establishment, his family and all of the Roman Authorities. He’s getting his plays from his father, and nothing is going to stand in the way of that. If we wonder how Peter knew how to stand up in the sermon I preached two months ago, look who taught him the way it was done.

In John the miracles are described as *semion*, the Greek word for signs. The focus is not on the miracle itself but on what they point to. They challenge us as readers in our assumptions about order and control, about what is possible and about where God is found and how God is known.

So back to the wedding at Cana. Jesus, his disciples and his mother are all there. And the wine has run out, which would have been considered shameful during new testament times. No wine is also symbolic that the joy had run out.

Jesus' mother comes to him and tells him about it, and we don't really know why. Was he as the eldest son, somehow responsible? And Jesus appears to be curt with her "Woman what is that to do with you and me?" In the first century Jewish mothers and sons had very close relationships and here he distances her with the term "Woman," signifying his freedom from human control and reliance upon God's direction. The phrase "my hour has not yet come" foreshadows his crucifixion.

Her response is, "do whatever he tells you." These words are similar to the words Pharaoh uttered about Joseph in the book of Genesis during the famine in which "Pharaoh expresses unconditional confidence in Joseph's ability to resolve the situation of scarcity. They also give full authority to Joseph."* Jesus' mother shows her confidence in his ability to remedy the situation, but does not interfere in the way he does it.

Jesus looks around and sees six waist-high stone purification jars standing empty. The number six symbolizes something that is not complete. "The stone jars for water rites of purification were part of the whole ritual apparatus which kept Israel consecrated for the Lord in the midst of a world which was defiled by sin. Purification is a negative action. The water removes the uncleanness but does not give them fullness of joy."** Jesus tells the servants to fill them with water. Jesus takes these Jewish vessels that are standing empty and fills them with the creation of something new in the midst of Judaism.

He then tells them to draw some out and take it to the steward of the banquet. So they do, and the steward is clueless about where it came from, although the servants who drew the wine knew. He calls the bridegroom aside and says "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink, but you have saved the best till now. The abundant wine is attributed to the bridegroom, but it came from the *real* bridegroom. All throughout this gospel the question of where Jesus' gifts come from and where he comes from is raised again and again.

The miracle itself is not described, but merely verified as it will be in the leftover bread after the feeding of the 5,000 and when the blind man says "I don't know, all I know is that I was blind and now I see." We're told this is the first of the miraculous signs, and Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him. In the miraculous abundance of the wine, Jesus' disciples recognize Jesus as the one who brought God to them.

Then, in the same chapter he goes to the temple and clears out the things that stand in the way of the abundant life he had come to bring. Jesus addresses people in their sphere of life. In the midst of grief, in unexpected ways. "Like the prophets who heal, their concern is to reveal the works of God in a suffering individual. The prerequisite is the trust in the healer. It is not a test of believing, but like in the Psalms, laments are transformed. In Jesus, the one who transforms sorrow is now human."***

I think that what happened on those occasions at El Ranchito was that we spoke honestly about Jesus with our questions and our doubts and our hopes. The mystery is that we were gathered in his name, our hearts started burning within us and the tears transformed into laughter and joy. How do we know it was Jesus? Did we see the miracle happen? No, we just experienced the result – in the midst of the pain and suffering, the tears were transformed into laughter and joy. ***Tears turning into laughter is the sign, it bears his signature.***

I dare you to say "Jesus and Margaritas" and not smile.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, This world you have placed us in is very hard on us. We are often blindsided by events over which we have no control. And we are embarrassed to say how often we know we make our lives hard by our poor decisions and lack of courage. But you have sent us Jesus, who can comfort us, strengthen us and heal us. Help us to be able to do what he taught us with his life, and what he continues to teach us through his spirit. He came so that we could live abundantly, *he is the antidote to what ails us*. It is ironic that the formula that works is presented like magical thinking and the one that doesn't is supported by data, charts and graphs and pretty airbrushed pictures. Help us to cling to the formula that works, because in the midst of all of our suffering, it has the ability to infuse real joy. We pray now as your Son taught us. OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN.....

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