

Christmas: A New Way

December 26, 2010
John 2: 1-11

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In the past weeks leading up to Christmas we have had sermons on hope, love, joy, and peace. Christmas Eve's focus was on community, ending with our singing "sleep in heavenly peace" while we looked upon the candlelight representing how he who was the light of the world grows in luminosity when person after person shares the light he first gave to us. On this day after Christmas there is one last word that speaks to the good souls of Orange County--Clearance. Now that's a promise without limits!" Whether it be a gym membership, a beauty treatment, or a cooking convenience, the claim is "it will change your life." I'm also reminded of the nearness of New Year's Eve and the promises we make to ourselves that are meant to change our lives for the better. So let's jump on the bandwagon. This sermon will change your life or at least connect you for a moment to the one who can.

Let's begin with a quiz. In the gospel of John, Jesus begins his ministry by...

- a) Forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man
- b) Changing water in wine at a wedding
- c) Gives the sermon on the mount
- d) Entering into the temple and reading Isaiah "I have come to proclaim the good news to the captives"

Do you have your answer? Okay, you who are brave what is it?

The others...in Mark, the first long story about Jesus is of the friends who lower the paralyzed man down through the roof of where he is preaching. The first thing he says to the man is "your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2). In Matthew the first sustained speech of Jesus comes in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God (Matthew 5). In Luke, he enters into the temple and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." (Luke 4: 16 ff) Each beginning sets the tone for the gospel. John chooses to begin with a party.

Here it is...from the gospel of John, chapter 2: 1 -11.

Once again I remind you that while all the gospels show signs of a community under stress, the gospel of John even more so, being put down on paper in its final form after the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed by the

Romans and after Jews have recognized that Christians are of a different sort from them. Jesus has been gone for a generation. There is no place for them to fit into their world, they who are not followers of the Roman Pantheon nor of the emperor. Nor do they adhere to the law of the Jews. They aren't fit for governance or temple leadership. They have no statues or buildings that mark their existence. Yet the voice we hear crying out of the wilderness is one of great joy. They who wrote this gospel want us to enter into their celebration so they invite us into a feast.

We arrive in Cana of Galilee, walk through the doors of a home, and there we find Jesus and his disciples. Even Jesus' mother is there. The problem is they missed the after Christmas sale and there is no wine! When the mother of Jesus tells him of the trouble, Jesus turns to his mother and says "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

I have often been bothered by the abruptness of Jesus' word to his Mom. It seems that Jesus is more than slightly dysfunctional in his ability to connect with her and, then, perhaps with anyone. I've wondered if Jesus needed distance in order to walk the difficult path ahead. That phrase about "my hour has not yet come" reminds me of my upbringing where you don't bother somebody, especially someone busy like Jesus, with your little needs. He has bigger things on his mind so get out of his way. This "reading" makes Jesus into a martyr from the very beginning, suffering before he ever makes it to the cross, one unhappy soul moving along the earth. The theology of "bear your cross" often comes out of such an interpretation.

Such a reading misses the whole point of the gospel. Remember we have entered into a celebration. As for Jesus calling his mother "woman," remember Jesus has lengthy conversations with the women of his gospel, the longest being with the woman at the well. The whole point of the incarnation is he has come and dwelled among us full of truth and glory! He has time for you and me.

Imagine, you play writers and film makers (because we need a better artistic depiction of Jesus than is out there in film and theater), imagine Jesus with a twinkle in his eye saying "woman," that term of endearment he uses again and again in the gospel of John for it is the women in the

gospel who move Jesus the most. He says “Woman” not “mom” for he sees Mary not from a child’s view but from the creator’s. He speaks “Woman,” connecting her to all the unnamed women in the gospel of John, linking their time to our own. “Woman,” says the bridegroom to the bride—the bride who is the church. “Woman what has this to do with you and me?”

Jesus asks knowing full well what it has to do with him, he who is the church’s true bridegroom. See him smiling out from the pages of our scripture, smiling out at us, a man wooing the one he loves. See the brightness of his eyes, feel the warmth of his love as he asks the question, the question which is for you and me to answer: “Of what concern is it to you and to me that the wine has run out?”

On the first level, when the wine runs out the celebration has ended. It is a sign that we are no longer having fun on this covenantal journey with God. It has become for us work, law, and tedious ritual. We do what we do because we are supposed to do it.

For many of us that’s how Christmas often is...we do what we are supposed to do. If not during Christmas, somewhere in your life you encounter the “shoulds” of living. You should have done this or that for your children. You should be spending more time talking to your neighbor. You should feel happy right now. Your house should be beautiful. You should lose weight, work less, work more, call your grandmother, and so on. By the way, work in an hour of prayer each day. None of us live guilt free. And there’s usually a moment, especially in this season when we try to do so much more, when it gets to us and our guts spill out. No one feels pure or holy the whole season, much less a whole life long. To try to be good can be so discouraging as to lead us into not wanting to try anymore. When living becomes duty, the wine has run out.

“Jesus is not a law giver,” speaks Luke Timothy Johnson He expands the law, strengthens the law, internalizes the law...he sums up the law “love the lord your God with all your heart, strength, and mind”...but he doesn’t give law. He doesn’t shout “clean up your act.”

They’ve run out of wine.

What has this to do with you and me? My time has not yet come.

See Jesus smile, see him wink. My time has not yet come so isn’t it true that I don’t need to do anything for you today? Do you not believe that the gospel is all about the cross? Didn’t God just send me so that I could die for you? Why worry about wine or joy or laughter or fun or connection with me? After all, I’m just a sacrificial lamb

doing what I must do.

And imagine with me that Mary, mother of Jesus, laughs. She turns to the servants with a smile and says “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

She trusts him. She trusts him to bring joy back to the ritual. She trusts him to transform what isn’t into what is. She doesn’t need to tell him what to do. She brings to Jesus the problem, their problem, our problem. We’ve lost what is needed in order to celebrate love, being loved, living in holy love.

Jesus willingly enacts the first sign. He takes these seven large vessels that held the dirty water of purification, the water in which people washed their hands, and changes the water into wine. That which used to purify, that which shouts out by its mere size “get clean” now signals it is time to celebrate. Stop worrying about cleaning yourself up, for this moment stop cleaning house, remember you are at a feast and God has set the table. .

Babette’s Feast, a 1987 Danish Film, depicts a group of law based Christians who have lost their joy. The people are set among tones of gray and words sparse. Babette, the heroine, a servant of sisters who are leaders of this very small Christian sect, wins a small fortune. She was a refugee from the war taken in by the sisters out of their Christian love. When she receives the money she has an idea. She decides to prepare for this little group of people a feast. So she uses her money to buy the very best food and wine and has it shipped in. The sisters are aghast at what shows up in their kitchen. As Babette cooks the group decides they will show up but they will not enjoy the feast. They will do their duty and be polite.

The time arrives and the group sits around the table. Babette enters in with the first course...you foodies would remember it. The scene unfolds expertly, as a group who first looks upon the food served as a child who is served spinach might, experience course after course of food delicious beyond their imaginations. The room is filled with conversation and laughter. What was a duty becomes a joy.

Jesus is not a law giver. I get so tired of those who turn Christian scripture into rules to live by...it is anathema to the living Word. Rather Jesus invites us to the feast, into relationship with him. I know, you want to know how. I promised “A New Way.”

The how is to believe the feast has been served no matter what your circumstance today. The how is to believe you’ve been invited to enjoy it. The how is to believe that which seems like simple dirty water can become, with God’s help, that which speaks of the divine love. The how is to believe that Jesus came and dwelled here so that

you might know the love of one who is full of grace and truth. You have entered a feast. Water can become wine. Jesus came and dwelled here that you might know grace and truth.

That is the New Way and if doesn't seem so new...well it isn't, it is old. It is the Christian Way but like Christmas itself, each time we celebrate there is new meaning.

Christmas is made new because the people in our lives, those who we love, change. It is made new because we change. Ornaments and Christmas greetings take on richer meaning. Food, once a simple need to get through the day, becomes the center of our day, becomes communion. Singing Silent Night with a church filled with people floods our memories with what is divine. Christmas is made new because all that we have been, all that we are, and all we know at the moment gives meaning to the celebration.

Life is made new because all that Jesus was and is and always will be meets all we have been, are, and will be... and the people of John's gospel say this is reason to celebrate! This is the wine that is better than all that has come before. It is a love without limits. Jesus will keep on serving up his love, course after course after course... believing there will come a day when you will taste and see the sweet and savory goodness of life with him.

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.