

"Jesus' First Statement"

Sermon: January 20, 2019

Based on John 2

Last week we followed a certain story line. Jesus was baptized. The Holy Spirit descended upon him. The heavenly Father anointed him. God said, "You are my beloved son." And now it gets real. The ministry begins, the gospel unfolds before our eyes, and Jesus goes to work... well, sort of! We find him... at a wedding – presumably dancing, eating, drinking, burping, making small talk, laughing. That's how Jesus begins his ministry, I am not making it up. Pretty surprising, isn't it? We often pay special attention to the first acts of a new leader. Most leaders want to show what they are about right away, to set the tone. When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, he chose the name of the most un-pope-like saint - Francis, - and wasted no time demonstrating his leadership profile.

On Holy Thursday, following his election, Francis washed and kissed the feet of ten male and two female juvenile offenders, aged from 14 to 21, imprisoned at Rome's Casal del Marmo detention facility, telling them the ritual of foot washing is a sign that he is at their service. This was the first time that a pope had included women in this ritual; one of the male and one of the female prisoners were Muslim. He was sending an early message of inclusiveness to the church and to the world. He was saying, "I stand for a different style of papacy, one that is service- oriented, one that is inclusive, one that is in the tradition of Francis of Assisi who lived among the poor and restored the church." So, we might ask: Did Jesus too make a statement at that wedding in Cana?

Indeed, Jesus made a statement, and what a statement it was! His first major act in public, according to the Gospel of John, was not a healing and not a sermon, not a prayer or a word of wisdom, not a memorized speech or a ritual, but something that would make bar owners across America sick with envy. He turned water into wine, and good wine we are told, Napa Valley quality wine, - wine in the 90's scale of Wine Spectator ratings, with spectacular after-notes. And the guy didn't even have a liquor license!!! But make no mistake, he is making a point here. In this early chapter of John, Jesus is setting the tone, and setting himself apart from most other rabbis and religious leaders of his time. His point is: "I have not come to make people more religious, but to connect them with God, the source of all life. And life is to be found in many different places." His point was: "I have not come to take the joys of life away from people, but to lead the community into the joy of God's presence." His point was: "I have not come to be 'holier than thou,' but to be human." Could it be that one of our biggest challenges as people is, and always has been: to become more human, to grow into a more profound and rich sense of humanity, to discover qualities in us that we didn't know we had, in other words: to turn our water into wine?

I remember reading one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's diary entries many years ago and I hope I remember the gist of it correctly. Bonhoeffer was the German pastor who is most famous for resisting the Nazis and getting involved in the resistance movement; he also was a gifted preacher and theologian. In the diary he recounted having a conversation with a Catholic candidate for the priesthood while traveling in a train one day. The two had an animated exchange about their dreams and ideas for the church. The young priest in training felt that giving up everything was the sacrifice God wanted him to make as a path toward the kingdom of God. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, felt that the kingdom of God was to be found in the midst of life, in the joys and sorrows we encounter every day - through faith. In the technical language of theology, Bonhoeffer

believed in an immanent God, a God who is present in our lives, a God who can be located just about anywhere with the eyes of faith. And I think the gospel reading for today supports his point. We find God at a wedding making wine. How is that for an immanent God?

Religious people often have this tendency to locate the Divine somewhere out there: in the desert, in the heavens, in a book, in a temple, a church or a shrine, in a particularly saintly person, but (God forbid!) not in our own kitchen, not at a party, not in our financial planning and not anywhere near our hobbies, please! We sometime go by the dogma of the separation of religion and life, even though that's nowhere written in the Bible. And now Jesus comes and dances in our face, telling us to re-think our proposition! "There is no separation between religion and life," he says. So, imagine if Jesus went to a Barnes and Nobles Bookstore today. Where would we find him? I am not so sure we would find him in the "religion and spirituality" section, to be honest. Maybe Jesus would peruse through the newest novels and mysteries, and a story or two would find its way into the things he'd tell people. Maybe he'd stand in the Psychology section and find new ways to explain some things he originally said. We have often confined God to the narrow field of religion, but really, God is the creator of the world, not the creator of religion! We find him in all corners of the world and in all kinds of people.

Last week I had a most interesting encounter with a man around my age, just before the Martin Luther King Service. We had walked down Dager Road in a large group of people, carrying symbols of peace, getting ready for the service at Bethlehem Baptist, which is the former building of the Beth Or Synagogue. That building is a symbol of peace between the religions all by itself. I don't know whether I approached him or he approached me, but before we knew it, we were into some major not-so-small-talk. I asked him whether he was connected to one of the faith communities and he replied that he lived in the Warrington area and was nominally a Jew, but really an atheist. "I don't believe in God," he said, "but I like these services." And we started talking about atheism. I find lots of people these days who call themselves "atheists," and I always wonder what they mean by that. Like this man, they often add that there is "something out there," they just can't put their finger on it. And I say, "Well, I can't put my finger on it either. It's God." What many atheists reject (and I hope I am not misrepresenting them) is a certain image of God, a certain religious image of God, and many times they are not so wrong. Those images are often misleading and primitive. The great "I am," the God who said to Moses, "I am who I am," cannot be captured in an image or a religion. We can only draw closer to God if we take off the shoes of our presumptions. But my real point here is: this man, atheist or not, showed up for the service. He walked the walk with us. He danced the dance with us. He came and he clapped to some of the messages, and I know that he was close to that something he couldn't put his finger on. And I think that's what counts in Jesus' book.

Finally, I said in the beginning that Jesus was making a statement by his appearance at the wedding of Cana, by his first sign taking place in a non-religious venue, as we would call it today. But there is another statement in this story. That statement is made by his mother. As she twists his arm to get him to do something about the wine shortage, she says to the servants, "Do what he tells you." And that sums up, more than any belief system, what Christianity is about: to do what Jesus tells me. That coming from a woman leading the way is another statement. So, we have heard it. We have tasted the life embracing approach of the Christ. Now we have to walk the walk and dance the dance and find God in the fullness (or sometimes the emptiness) of our life, because God is here, God is with us, even in church! **Amen.**