

Sermon – “But the Servants Knew”

Sunday, January 20, 2019

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-11

Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading is a promise of hope given to the people of ancient Israel by the prophet Isaiah. Hear these words from Isaiah 62, verse 1 through 5.

² The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴ You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.

⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

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Our Gospel reading is a story which comes from near the very beginning of Jesus's ministry, only a few days after being baptized and immediately following his calling the first disciples to follow him. Hear God's Word to you in these words from the book of John, chapter 2, verses 1 to 11:

^{2:1} On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it.

⁹ 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 ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."¹

A moment of great import: the first of the signs of Jesus of Nazareth showing him to be the Christ. "[R]evealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." Surely this line speaks of an immense show of majesty and might, a work of great visibility with a publicly conspicuous significance! A miracle of life saved, or of mountains moved! But no! It was a miracle of...catering! Jesus never does do things the way people expect, does he?

And on the subject of details possibly being different than we expect, there is something else here of which I would like us to take note. We talk often, as we move through our various scripture readings together, about the many miracles of Jesus. But an interesting feature of the book of John is that it consistently uses a different word than we first think of to describe the supernatural interventions of Jesus; John always describes these events not as "miracles", but as "signs". What is the difference?

Miracles *are* things; signs *point us to* things. The author of the Gospel of John seems to be very concerned that we understand that whatever direct and good outcome may have been produced, the true center of meaning in one of these events isn't in the occurrence itself and its consequences—the miracle—but in something else that it points to. I probably am not spoiling the mystery for anyone by stating that for John, everything is about pointing us to Jesus Christ; to his person, his identity, his nature, and his purpose.

And an interesting thing about the scene described in today's reading is who gets to see the sign. "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.'"² Do the guests know where the wine came from? No. Does the steward? No. And the bridegroom is probably only confused. But the servants knew. They recognized what had happened.

The servants always know what's up. Waiters, waitresses, bartenders, maids; they see it all. While in college, my brother used to work during summers as a caddy at a very upper-class golf club in an ultra-wealthy North Shore suburb of Chicago. We are talking about the kind of place with membership by invitation only, a \$60,000 initiation fee, and another \$20,000 in annual dues. This is the kind of place where chief executive officers of major international corporations bring their business partners and future partners, or their lawyers, or their favorite politicians or major athletes, and they golf...and they also talk, about business and personal matters. Which means the caddies knew about all of it.

¹ John 2:11 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² John 2:9-10 (*NRSV*).

Because one of the things about servants is that they are treated like—well, maybe “treated like” is too strong a phrase. The fact is that, except insofar as those served are aware that someone is performing needed tasks, the servants are not even there to them at all. And being thus totally invisible people, the caddies knew it all. They knew which of the local wealthy and powerful people were making what attempted business deals, which ones were embezzling, who was cheating on his income taxes, and who was cheating on his wife.

The servants always know what is up, because they are ignored. It is therefore an interesting contrast, in the life of Jesus, that he not only spent time with the people who “didn’t count,” he often came to those people first and showed them things, ignoring the high-ranked altogether. He started that way from the beginning, born in humble circumstances. Remember the wise men? They went through the ordinary power channels and sought an audience with the current king, Herod, when they came looking for the newborn king...only to find Herod had no idea of any of this!³

Jesus ate with outcasts and low people, often challenging, insulting, or even ignoring the standard, worldly structures of power and importance. And “important people” often get very bent out of shape when they are not treated as especially important, or when they are shown to be hypocrites rather than having earned or deserved their high stations. If you need evidence of this, consider that Jesus was entirely peaceful. He never called for armed revolution. He even told people to pay their taxes;⁴ and yet the authorities were so angered by him that they had him executed.

It should be no surprise that Christianity’s growth has always been greatest among the people in the least of circumstances. From the start, it was, with some exceptions, largely the common people, not the VIP’s, who heard the message, believed it, and spread it onward. Whereas, by contrast, the spreading of the Gospel has often been impeded by those in places of power, who have often done one of two damaging things, both of which we need to be vigilant against doing ourselves.

One is that people in high places have abused their positions of power. Of course, it is not any surprising thing in human history that persons who have arrived at places of influence have succumbed to the temptation to exploit it for themselves at the cost of others. But when people do this *while publicly displaying themselves as Christians*, this distorts the image of Jesus to people. It keeps people from wanting to know Christ, if selfish use of power over others is the sort of thing that being Christian is about.

We surely see plenty of this kind of nonsense from politicians, and it is at the heart of why clergy sexual abuse scandals are so spiritually destructive on top of the direct damage the offenses themselves do. They disgrace the Good News of the Gospel itself, casting Jesus himself—the very person who came to *save* victims of every wrong and lift them back up—in a repulsive, unapproachable light to those who have been hurt.

³ See Matthew 2:1-12.

⁴ See Matthew 22:15-22.

The other damage people with power tend to do with the Gospel is to smash it into unrecognizable fragments, and then wield the heavy chunks as weapons of power. Instead of being transformed by the Gospel and allowing it to change them, they transform it, into something they can hold up as a justification for their own positions of power over others and as a means of enforcing their will. The most clear example of this in our own nation's history is how landowners and the preachers they employed used pulpits like this one, which belong to Jesus Christ, to subjugate an entire race, convincing themselves and their children for generations that having white people on top was the God-ordained order of things.

Tomorrow is when we remember someone who pulled the rug out from under a lot of that. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was not just a civil rights leader in the political arena. He was a preacher of the Gospel. And the reason the Gospel he preached was a Gospel that could be believed by his hearers was that he made the world hear loudly and clearly once again about Jesus loving the low-born in society, the ones treated as if they do not count. People encountered him then as dangerous and threatening, and it was largely because he followed that Christly pattern of solidarity with the left-out people, which demonstrated the illegitimacy of the present-day leaders and the system those people were comfortable maintaining.

And it was transformative. So can we be, in the lives of those around us. For we, too, are signs. We are churchgoing people, and the face we present to the world is a sign of who Christ is. Are we going to point to a Christ whose disciples are arrogant, adore our own power, and are comfortable being comfortable even when surrounded by need? Or will they know we are Christians by our love?⁵ We are all flawed, and so thanks be to God that we are not the *only* signs of who God is; but we are, unavoidably, a part of the story every person we meet will absorb about what God's grace means.

Jesus turning water into wine was a small matter, in our usual way of looking at the grand scheme of things. But it wasn't about the wine. It was a sign. It demonstrated something, first to the servants, and later to everyone else, about who Jesus is, and about the promise he brings. By being a miracle, it was a sign of his power. By being revealed to the servants first, it was a sign of his eventual overturning of the order of things. Do you remember his first recorded preaching moment in Luke?

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

⁵ As described in the powerful lyrics of Christian purpose authored by Peter Scholtes in the hymn "We Are One in the Spirit", also popularly known as "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love".

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”⁶

This is the kind of statement those who find themselves blind, oppressed, or out of favor will hear and take note of. If you are left out by the world, it is a statement of promise to you, personally, that God has not forgotten you. And any sign that conveys that is a powerful sign, whether it is a reversal of death itself or a little demonstration to a small group of servants who were formerly invisible and suddenly find themselves inside the circle of those touched by God.

“You shall no more be termed Forsaken,” Isaiah proclaimed to the people of Israel in our first reading, “and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married, for the Lord delights in you.”⁷

Let us pray ourselves to see, too, the signs of who our Lord is, and follow them where they point us. May we let ourselves be torn down where we are roadblocks to ourselves and others, and be servants to one another, as Jesus commanded us to be, for only as servants will we really know what Jesus is doing. And it is then that we will see the glory of what is to happen, for it is not in your places of importance or honor that you will find Christ coming to you; it is in the places where you are left out, lonely, and forsaken, the places you either pretend away or despair over—these are the places you need not fear forever, for there is good news from the God of all power and might: “the Lord delights in you.” Amen.

⁶ Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV), in which Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2a.

⁷ Isaiah 62:4a (NRSV).