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Epiphany II
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This is a great Gospel story and one of my favorites, I think. When Carol and I had some time together this week I asked if I could field-test some of my ideas about a sermon. When I'd finished, she said I had more than one sermon I could preach. I decided on one of the themes and if I were one of those preachers who liked titles, I would call this sermon "Calling the Church to Conversion".

This Gospel is about a most joyous occasion, a wedding. Weddings seems to be a solemn and party-filled event in every culture, where pulling out all the stops in celebration is expected. We've been in and been to weddings like that. There are jokes about bankrupting the father of the bride for the wedding, sparing no expense, in fancy dress and in the midst of one big party, the reception.

That's where we are today, at some equivalent of a wedding reception. The contact person is the bridegroom himself, so it appears. Let me recap the story:

Wedding happens; party goes on and guest list includes Jesus, his mom and his newly-minted batch of disciples. Servant pours the last little bit of wine into someone's cup, goes back for more and there is no more. Inquiries go up the line as to where there is more wine. Somehow Jesus' mother finds out about this. She speaks to Jesus, who has a terse word or two for her, similar to the encounter at the Temple when he was 12. She ignores him, speaks to the servants that don't belong to her and orders the servants and Jesus around with the firm belief the problem is going to be fixed. That is confidence.

Jesus asks the servants to fill up huge jugs with water. After complying with his request and with no further fanfare in the story, the servants draw a bit of liquid into a dipper, taking it to the steward of the party who rushes to the bridegroom and said, “Hey, where did this come from? It is better than what we were serving a few minutes ago! What’s up with that?” The steward and bridegroom are perplexed; the majority of the revelers at the party are clueless. The servants, on the other hand, get it and the disciples believe in him.

I have some basic thoughts about this miracle story: The first clue is “THREE DAYS”, something we hear more than once in Gospel accounts. I think it is a hint at something marvelous. I take it as a marker for a miracle in the Gospels. Here, like at Easter, what is taken as a downturn in events becomes a glorious cause for celebration.

Anytime I hear the word SERVANT, I think of Jesus’ disciples and all of us as disciples of the Lord. We follow his instructions, hear his commands, and watch the miracles unfold. And others are in awe of the miracles, like the steward and the bridegroom.

Some basic thoughts about application of this story and where I think we fit into this story.

I think each of us is one of those vessels. We come into community in the church seeking a whole lot of things. We look for meaning, belonging, family, sometimes arriving because of the addition of children into the family, or a journey of loss or grief, or some pull that we have resisted and can resist no longer. Or we have come filled with remorse over mistakes made and seeking a word of forgiveness. We feel empty and we want to fill ‘er up.

You can come to church, as one of these empty vessels, and get filled up with water pretty quickly. And think about the precious commodity of water, especially in arid and dry places. If you came from arid and dry places, you can be filled with this water. Clean water where there isn't any is more valuable than gold, as in Haiti and other places on this planet. When you are thirsty, really thirsty, a drink of water is compelling and something we crave. But what happens after we are filled with this water?

The subtle touch of Jesus can turn that water into something else. This quiet and non-demonstrative Jesus of today's story can take the yearnings and longings and thirstiness that we have slaked with water into a miraculous bit of doing, finest wine. This speaks to me of a spirituality that is grounded more in Jesus and a profound belief in God that goes beyond what I NEED from the church into to what I need in a relationship with God. This doesn't denigrate the value of the water or the need to be filled with it. But the next level is something to be sought.

I guess what I want you to hear is that we are more than a social club and a gathering to feel good about ourselves and each other. The God we profess seeks a relationship with us, the human beings here. And that change means things are different. I know some traditions pray for that water to wine change with great vigor, with altar calls and much hoopla and new rules and a new playing field for the individual when this change, this CONVERSION, has happened.

For many of us, it was less dramatic and almost as quiet as the water to wine story in this Gospel lesson. There were no fireworks for some of us, though I don't think that makes the story less interested, less compelling, less dramatic.

Let us pray for ourselves and others in this Epiphany Season to seek the changes conversion brings. As Jesus is revealed in these weeks as a worker of miracles and the hope of Israel, may he reveal himself in our lives as just those things, a worker of miracles and the hope of our hearts.