

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Feast of the Epiphany C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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To Be A Blessing

I spent the last two days flying to and from Los Angeles to be a part of the funeral of a beloved niece who died far too young. We've been praying for her for a very long time here at St Barnabas. And recently we've been praying for her son Cyan and the rest of her family too. Her name is Anise. She was, of course, utterly beloved of God and of so very many people. And one of the hallmarks of her life, one of the many profoundly important ways she touched so many was in her deep commitment to the 12 step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Anise came into my life when my husband Jim came into my life, and she was a gift. I knew her only in her healthiest times... she had cancer much of the time I knew her, and still, she was healed and healthy. Her body did what bodies do, but her Spirit did what Spirits do too. Anise died healed and healthy, and for that I am very grateful.

Jim presided at the funeral, and as you might imagine, it was beautiful. While many of the people present weren't "church" people, we followed the Burial Rite from the Book of Common Prayer. We read some of the beautiful scriptures appointed for the Burial Rite, and when we read from the book of the Prophet Isaiah, we read these words:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear...

Abundant food, abundant wine, all signs of God's extraordinary abundance and favor. And still, in that place, with those people, reading of food and more food, wine and more wine, something inside of me startled.

That passage from Isaiah is deeply meaningful to me - I read it at my own mother's funeral. And yet listening to those words in a beautiful little 19th century Episcopal church filled with people, many of whom were people in recovery, many of whom are people who have little interest in church, most of whom wouldn't necessarily think of goodness and abundance and God's great delight when they thought of wine and more wine - well, I heard the words differently. Because of the context I was in and the people I was surrounded by, I heard Isaiah's words differently than I'd ever heard them before. Listening to the prophet Isaiah in that church with those people, I wondered about how our assumptions or our insider knowledge or our familiarity with words and ideas and "ologies" that are utterly foreign to most people might make church - and even scripture - something that divides rather than welcomes, gathers in and unites. So today, I am even more aware of our need to understand the contexts the gospel writers were writing from and writing in to. Today I am even more aware of our need to set down our certainties and our "ologies" and do our best to understand what Jesus was doing and saying to people then, so we can try to make sense of what his words and actions mean for us now.

Let's just say we need to be very, very careful about what we're certain of. Let's always remember that we need to be prayerful when we read scripture and even more prayerful when we try to make meaning of it. Let's remember too that no matter how meaningful, we find scripture, we need to be careful that we don't try to make 1st century writings, and writings from centuries before, direct translations for our own lives. That doesn't mean we need to get things just right, that we need to be intimidated when we read scripture, nor does it mean that scripture is all metaphor. It does mean that there are lots of things we really need to know about first century Palestine, about the world Jesus inhabited and the world John was writing in to. Because that is the only way we are ever going to do anything more meaningful than say Jesus made a miracle and wasn't that awesome?

Yes, Jesus turned water in to wine, lots of it and that was awesome. But why does that matter for us? And what does it mean that this was how he started his public ministry... at least according to John's gospel. Last Sunday, we heard an entirely different story of the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry when we heard from Luke. And while the stories in Luke and John – and in Matthew and Mark as well – are different stories, they have something very important in common. In Luke's gospel, Jesus began his public ministry when he was baptized by John in the River Jordan. Jesus lined up with all of those beloved sinners, got dunked in the muddy, murky River Jordan just like they did, and received John's baptism of repentance right there with them. Jesus had nothing to repent of and yet he stepped in to the midst of all those people, and did what they did, joining in solidarity and becoming one of them. And when he did that, we saw him as he really is – Emmanuel, God with us, God becoming one of us. And while we might not see it at first glance, that's what happened at the wedding in Cana too. Jesus joined in with all the community and did what they did. As a guest at that wedding, he brought gifts of blessing and wine.

I know that isn't the only important part of this story. It's very possible that you want to hear about why this was Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel, or maybe you want to know why he seemed so rude to his mother – just fyi, that wasn't rude behavior in first century Palestine – maybe you want to know why his mother's response was so faith filled. Maybe you want to know about the purification rituals the water in all those jugs was used for or why the servants were the only ones who were privy to the miracle when the "important people" had no clue.

Those are all good and important questions, and still what speaks most strongly to me is the reality that the first act – at least according to John – Jesus' first public act was to step in to a situation where people were about to be completely and utterly shamed and offered the greatest abundance imaginable. Yes, I know that at first Jesus told his mother that it wasn't his time. And we don't know what happened in him that changed his mind. But something did happen. And when it did, Jesus seemed to shift his focus from perfectly timing the revelation of his divinity, to ensuring that this wedding was blessed and that there was abundance for all.

Wedding feasts in Jesus time often went on for days. These were feasts where everyone in the community was invited and everyone in the community helped to make the party happen. While the bride and groom were the hosts, they counted on the guests to bring gifts of wine and food to keep the festivities going. When the wine ran out at this wedding feast, it seems only the stewards and the

servants, and of course Jesus' mother, knew. It's important not to miss that. You see, if the bride and groom, or the rest of the wedding guests had known the wine had run out, if the party had ended because there wasn't enough, it would have been understood as something akin to a curse on this couple beginning their brand new life together... people would have seen it as a lack of blessing on the part of the community, because the community hadn't brought forth enough to help the bride and groom host the feast. Yes, the wedding family had some measure of the hosting responsibility, but in the first century Mediterranean world, that didn't mean they had to provide everything. This young couple just beginning their new life together would have been shamed beyond imagining if the food or the wine had run out at their wedding. So while the miracle of Jesus turning water in to wine is kind of awesome, what seems so much MORE important is that Jesus, even though he led with "it's not time for me to be making a statement, not time for me to be God in front of all these people" decided to offer a life of unspeakable blessing to this blissful newly married couple rather than let them live in to a life of shame. Do you see? The rules, the plans, even the revelation of divinity all dropped away when Jesus blessed this young couple by doing what he could do to give them a good start, a new beginning, a life of abundance and grace.

The same thing is true for us, you know. We have plans. We know what we're doing and when we're doing it. We've already decided how it's all going to go. And if we want to, we can go on like that. But what I love about the wedding in Cana is that Jesus – with the help of his mama, I have to say – seems to set aside his plans for his perfectly timed revelation. And in John's gospel, that's really saying something. Jesus did what he could do to offer blessing and a real future for the bride and groom whose wedding he'd been invited to. It probably wasn't what he'd planned, but that's the beauty in it.

You see, most all of the time, there really is something we can do to bless what is right in front of us, to make a pathway to a future that is sweet and loving and filled with possibility. And sometimes, we need to lay aside our plans, maybe even lay aside our hopes and dreams in order to make a place for God's infinitely more expansive hopes and dreams so we can have our part in ushering in all that goodness. That's what it is to be co-creators with God, to be the kingdom builders and kingdom bringers. And it can only happen if we set aside our certainties, set aside our assumptions that we have the only path to the divine, set aside our need to have everything be the way we decided it should be before we looked around us and saw the exquisite beauty in the differences that are all around us. God comes to us in so many ways, and we ought not to miss that. The apostle Paul said it so beautifully...

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

It is the same God who activates everything good in everyone. Everyone. Amen.