

“God Speaks in Miracles”

January 17, 2016

Word of God Speak series – 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Weddings - beautiful occasions for those who attend, a lot of stress for those who plan and prepare. Every pastor could tell you stories about the funny stuff, the embarrassing moments, the difficult family members, and the list goes on. There are times when it seems just getting through the wedding is a miracle!

Miracles are tough, and most of us don't accept miracles so easily. We might call something that happens “miraculous,” but we hesitate to claim miracles. Maybe it seems presumptuous on our part. And maybe we're smart to be careful when so many of us pray for a “miracle” to happen in a certain way, and it doesn't - at least not the way we envision. Maybe we're smart to be careful because there are those who would claim that they can do miracles, but let's be clear that God is the One who works miracles - sometimes through you and me, but it's always about God does.

Even in John's Gospel, this story of water into wine is tough to grasp. I'd like to make it more logical so that I could explain it. But I can't. Remember that this season, Epiphany, is a time when we celebrate how God reveals who Jesus is to the world. And this is a big moment!

We've talked about the wise men. For them Jesus is revealed as King. Last week, we heard about when Jesus was baptized, when God called Jesus “my beloved Son.” Now we encounter Jesus at a wedding and find that he's filled with God's power to do miracles.

No less than today, weddings were important occasions. The festivities lasted for days. Weddings were a bright spot of joy for people who worked hard and lived in poverty. It was time to celebrate, so that's what people did. They partied hard!

Weddings are still joyous occasions when people celebrate something new – a marriage and new life for the couple. Yes, we're happy for the couple. But, let's be honest, we like the festivities – food, drink, dancing, atmosphere. It's a time when we're treated to a night out – and for the ones who throw the party, everything has to run smoothly!

Wine was essential for Jewish celebrations. To run out would mean humiliation, especially because hospitality was a hallmark of Jewish culture. If the wine ran out, the couple and their families would have failed to show hospitality to their guests. If the wine ran out, the party was over!

It's into this potential social disaster that Jesus performs his first public miracle as the Gospel of John records it. Mary asks Jesus for his help, and though his response to

her may sound harsh, it may not have been intended that way. His intent may have been to say, “Just wait – I’ll take care of it.” Remember that Jesus is fully human - he is Mary’s son, and their interaction here shows it.

Perhaps we don’t envision Jesus as a partygoer – at least not in our terms. But his presence at this wedding in Cana reminds us of something important as we celebrate Epiphany – that Jesus came into the world and lived in the world. He didn’t live apart from people, but participated in everyday activities and - YES! - probably even enjoyed himself.

Our faith in Christ can’t be separated from our everyday lives. In fact, it should show in everything we do. Jesus’ life and ministry transformed people because he was active in the world. He interacted with people and formed relationships. He didn’t cut himself off from the world; he was intentional about being with others and showing his glory among them.

Even the fact that he performed a miracle in an average home challenges us to think about how we show our faith in our homes. Home is an important place for us, but sometimes we forget to show our faith there. We treat those closest to us like strangers. But Jesus’ presence in this home and the power he shows there reminds us to honor our homes as places where our faith can make a difference. It’s a place where miracles happen!

The transformation of the water into wine tells us something about what Jesus offers us, too. The water Jesus used was there for ceremonial washing – first, for people to wash their feet as they entered the house and, second, for them to wash their hands.

This practice was vital, and if you didn’t do it, there was the threat of you being “unclean.” That brought isolation. Jesus takes water that was used to ward off a spiritual threat and transforms it into wine that was a symbol of life and joy. He is changing the game! Jesus’ work is another revelation of the new covenant, the new Kingdom that God is ushering in.

Perhaps we forget that life lived with the joy of the Lord is really supposed to be joyful! Imagine this wedding – guests enjoying themselves with food and drink, ready to celebrate for days. People wouldn’t work, but spend this time together. The sense of community and hospitality was important. It really was a celebration of joy on a grand scale.

Our lives reflect what it means to be in relationship with God, and if there’s no joy, then our witness isn’t compelling to those around us! One writer says, “God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in.” God offers us abundant life in Jesus Christ, and this miracle, this sign, calls us to remember that we’re called to joy because of God’s grace!

God calls us to celebrate this life because we have been liberated from the fear of death. We can anticipate the life to come. As the Body of Christ in the world, we share the promise of abundant life with others.

Water into wine is a miracle – but it teaches us more than just Jesus’ ability to do great things. The people at the wedding wouldn’t use all of the wine in those stone jars – it was as much as 180 gallons! So there’s something here about what God gives to the world through Jesus. There’s something about how God provides for us.

So I wonder...can the wine here represent God’s grace in Jesus Christ? Grace is always more than we need and always more than we deserve. Grace is there – not because we can earn it, but because God gives it freely. Grace is abundant – there’s enough to go around, enough to spare, enough to share, enough that it won’t run out. And don’t forget what the steward says – the wine Jesus offers is better than what they drank before it ran out! We cannot explain the miracle of grace; we can only accept it and live in it.

The most important part of this wedding isn’t the fact that the couple is spared the humiliation of running out of wine. The most important thing is that the party can go on! Jesus came to bring joy! He came to bring life! He came to bring hope! This miracle - this sign - is so that everyone will know that God’s power is real.

There are other places in Scripture where the Kingdom of God is described as a party – a banquet with a feast laid out for God’s people. What an image! We stand in the midst of God’s amazing grace! We choose every day whether to stand in God’s grace or to ignore it. We choose whether to rely on God’s grace for the strength to live with one another or to dismiss it as unhelpful.

Guests came together because of Jesus’ care for the couple. And we come together because of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us gifts that we might continue his ministry. And when we’re together, we know that God’s grace is sufficient because we experience it in each other – there’s enough to go around. We depend on it because we hear each other’s stories of new life. We know that God’s power is real – that God cares for us and that God asks us to share in that power by using our gifts to give God glory.

And this miracle tells us something about transformation and new possibilities in our own lives. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ means that we live our lives in his grace, which calls us to show his qualities – love, compassion, care, forgiveness, and mercy. It means that we believe in miracles and look signs of God’s glory in our midst.

Maybe it’s tough to talk about miracles, but I’ve experienced them. Hopefully you can point to a moment when you’ve experienced God’s grace in a powerful way.

Miracles happen when we take the signs of God's love and faithfulness for what they are. Miracles help us to trust God.

God is working miracles here. God is working to transform us. The time and energy and prayer that has been a part of the Vital Church Initiative has brought hope and life - and change. Change is hard, but it's a part of transformation - of moving with God and seeking God's will for us.

As we consider merger with Lakeside, I'm encouraged by our commitment and attention to "welcoming all" and the sensitivity to the grief that others may carry. I'm excited that nine people representing both congregations gathered to pray together yesterday and will continue to meet. It is a miracle what God does in the church – bringing us together to do the work of Jesus Christ, bringing out the best in each other.

As we remember Dr. Martin Luther King this week, I always remember first and foremost that he was a Christian pastor. God used him to change the conversation about race and to change the world for the better. He offered hope and stood firm in his faith in a God who created all people and loved all people. God is working miracles, and God needs us to keep on seeking justice for all people!

We worship and serve a God who makes miracles all around us and even through us. Believe it! Look around! Claim God's grace, sufficient for our needs, abundant and extravagant. Live in it so that others might know it, too! Thanks be to God. AMEN.