

A Miracle

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C – John 2:1-11

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 20, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I've already told you many times before that growing up, my Daddy was a teacher, a junior high science teacher for most of my memory. I think I've told at least some of you that Dad was *also* a lay preacher in the Missionary Church, that little denomination that I grew up in – you know, the one that makes the Baptists look like a bunch of liberals. Since Mom was also a teacher, many summers when I was growing up, my folks, the five of us kids, and our mutt-mix of a dog would pile into our station wagon for the mind-numbing, nearly non-stop trip from Phoenix to west-central Ohio where my parents had grown up. Though he later had a weekday summer job as well, when I was maybe nine to eleven, Dad would act as a substitute preacher for the churches in that region, filling in for pastors so they could take a summer vacation. Sometimes we were at the same church for two Sundays in a row, but mostly, in that tradition that had no lectionary to guide the selection of readings, I got to hear the same sermon pretty much all summer long. It was okay, I suppose, because all of us kids were always fawned over by the host church, and even better, the day usually continued with a pot-luck lunch and hymn singing well into the afternoon. By the time the summer was over and it was time to pile in for the return trip – our minds were not the only things that got numb, by the way – I could entertain myself during Dad's forty to sixty minute sermon by quoting huge portions of it from memory. Hmm... I wonder if that influenced the eventual track of my life.

Anyway, one summer – or maybe it was two in a row – Dad added a twist, providing an additional teaching after the fried chicken and jello-molds were all gone and the “Singspiration,” as it was called, had passed the one-hour mark. I think Dad called it “Science and Scripture” or something like that, and it involved using some of his science class demonstrations to illustrate spiritual concepts. I think he finally decided to call this popular program quits when, using zinc and hydrochloric acid to produce hydrogen to illustrate the often unseen power of the Holy Spirit, he sent a very spectacular three or four foot tongue of flame into the curtains of one church's fellowship hall, nearly setting them ablaze with something *less* than the fire of the Holy Spirit.

My favorite “Science and Scripture” presentation, though, was one that illustrated this morning's reading from John's Gospel, the story of Jesus and the wedding at Cana. Dad would set a table at the front of the assembly area with an empty gallon-sized clear glass jar and an array of smaller containers – baby food jars, as a matter of fact – each filled with water. Before he began, he would invite someone, usually the smallest child in the assembly, to come forward and drink from one of the containers.

As Dad told the story you heard just a few moments ago, he added one container after another to the larger jar. Because everyone knows this story, by the time he reached the climax where the water turns to wine, every member of the congregation, especially the youngest ones, were focused expectantly on what was *supposed* to happen in that big jar. Then with a flourish of the showman that he was, Dad added the *last* jar of water – and absolutely *nothing* happened. The gasp was one of disappointment rather than amazement, as all eyes turned from the still *very* watery jar to my Dad's seemingly perplexed face. Dad leaned down to examine the unsatisfactory exhibit, and the younger ones up front leaned forward to meet his gaze through the crystal clear flop. Then, standing again, Dad adopted the perspective of one of the servants in today's story, those who had been given instruction to fill those big stone water jars, to remind his listeners that Jesus had said the jars must be filled *to the top*. Looking around in confusion, Dad “found” two more baby food jars under the table and added one of them to the jar while retelling the part of the story where the servants fill the jars. “Still not *quite* full,” he said, again peering intently at the

water level. Then, while he told about the best-man's delight with the plain water turned into excellent wine for that ancient wedding, my Dad added the contents of the last jar, filling the larger container right to the brim, and turning it suddenly to a brilliant red-wine purple. Young and old, *including* the preacher's ten-year-or-so-old son, let out a much more agreeable gasp, usually accompanied by spontaneous applause, before someone removed the beautifully wine-looking jar of liquid, (that was usually *my* job) and we moved on with the program, usually more old-time hymn singing.

Of course, it wasn't really a miracle, and everyone knew it. But Dad *also* knew that no one in any of those thoroughly teetotaling crowds would have *ever* touched the undrinkable solution of baking soda and phenolphthalein, even it had turned to a 1963 *Chateau Neuf de Pap*.

Sometimes, in our modern, thoroughly scientific comprehension of the world around us, it is easy for us to be a little... *uncomfortable* with stories like the one in this morning's Gospel lesson. We can get a little embarrassed, in our modern sensibilities, by the whole *idea* of miracles. At best, we can see water turned into wine as an irrelevant and unnecessary manipulation of the physical laws of the universe. Worse, we may even see it as some sort of entertaining yet deceptive parlor trick. But if, in our conviction that the modern expansion of human knowledge has made miracle and mystery meaningless, we dismiss this story as equally irrelevant or deceptive, then we are *sorely* mistaken. Because the Jesus to which the Gospels point is certainly something else, some *one* else, indeed.

It is possible, I suppose, to settle for a Son of God who in his divinity painted a picture of God's love for us – without actually *touching* the material world. There were people in the early Church whose scriptures lay hidden in the desert sands for centuries who believed just that. And there *are* people today who still find comfort in such a hands-off Jesus. But that's not the Jesus to which the Gospels point.

It is equally possible, I suppose, to settle for a Christ that was a really nice guy, a wonderful messenger of God, a powerful prophet of the Father's love – and nothing more. The Creeds were first written to speak to those that looked for such a Christ. In today's modern and *post*-modern conviction that if we human beings *try* hard enough, if we *learn* enough, if we *do* enough, we can save the world and ourselves, all *by* ourselves, such a Christ is more than acceptable. But that's not the Christ to which the Gospels point.

The Jesus to which the Gospels point, the Christ that, at her best the Church proclaims still, the Son of God who was born into human form, into human time and space, into the nitty-gritty reality of human life and death was something else, some *one* else indeed.

Both fully divine *and* fully human, the Jesus Christ in whom I believe with all my heart, used his own lips to speak words that tore away the blinders from those who lived in darkness. He used his own hands to break the chains of the lame and the deaf and the palsied and the blind. He used his own heart to reach down into the lives of the people he touched, to pull from them the captivating demons of darkness and pain and sin. He used his own life's blood to set those people free, including this one – free to live, free to love, free to *be* loved.

The Jesus who proved his power *first* by turning water into wine, proved his power *best* when he turned a cup of wine into the Blood of his own singular sacrifice for your sins and mine. That's not a parlor trick. It's not an illusion. It's nothing more, and certainly nothing *less* – than a *miracle*. A miracle of grace. A miracle of mercy. A miracle of love. And thanks be to God for such miracles. Amen.