

Epiphany 2C (1/20/2019)

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalm 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

We treat Jesus like a guest, but ultimately he is our host. We don't invite him into our lives; he invites us into his. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, like a flood of good wine that overflows our cups to fill the cups of others.

Benjamin Franklin never said "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." The actual quote, originating in a letter to a French acquaintance, is this:

We hear of the conversion of water into wine at the marriage in Cana, as of a miracle. But this conversion is, through the goodness of God, made every day before our eyes. Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, and which incorporates itself with the grapes to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy!¹

Franklin's observation is a good summary of our Gospel today, the third of three great epiphanies we celebrate at the onset of this season in the church year.

God's overflowing goodness is made manifest in the sight of onlookers –

that's the significance of the prodigious gift of good wine at the wedding

feast. And, as Benjamin Franklin seemed to understand, that particular sign

at the beginning of John's Gospel, the inaugural event of Jesus' ministry,²

points to a much larger reality – that God's goodness is, in fact, the source of every delicious wine, every celebration, every abundance.

¹ <http://freakonomics.com/2011/03/24/quotes-uncovered-beer-or-wine-as-proof/>.

² Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 536.

We might leave it at that this week, and spend the rest of the time devoted to the sermon toasting the reasons we have to celebrate God's abundance. But such a jubilant expression of gratitude, faithful as it may be, ought not to ignore all those who may not be in a celebratory mood. Think of the hundreds of thousands of federal workers currently on unpaid leave, and those working without the assurance of compensation.³ Think of the hundreds of millions of people around the world without reliable access to clean water, let alone festive drink.⁴ **How are we to delight in God's abundance in the face of want? How are we to celebrate God's goodness in the face of suffering?**

These are rightful questions that don't have straightforward answers. Nevertheless, the questions direct us back to the story itself, a story that in the end is less about wine than it is about Jesus. And, **Jesus is the very one in whom God meets the world's persistent need with persistent grace; he is Immanuel, God with us in both joy and suffering.**

We often conceive of Jesus as our guest, the one we invite into our lives in order to receive his benefits. We even refer to him that way in the famous table grace: "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed." According to popular theological wisdom, Jesus is knocking; all we have to do is open the door to him and receive him as our personal Lord and Savior. In fact, Jesus is a guest at the wedding at Cana, at least at first. Until his mother gently

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/01/15/government-shutdown-2019-five-ways-federal-shutdown-wastes-money/2573961002/>.

⁴ https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/wash_statistics.html.

prods him to step into his role as God's anointed, he is content to sit back and share in the celebration. Yet, when the moment arrives to rescue the bridegroom from the embarrassment of a wine shortage and keep the party going, Jesus quietly makes good on God's promise to provide abundantly. The steward and the guests are none the wiser; they're pleasantly surprised that the bridegroom has saved the best wine for last. **Only the servants and the disciples perceive that Jesus is the source of this blessing. And through this act of extravagant generosity, he goes from being a guest to the host.**

It's the same pattern we witness in the great resurrection story from the Gospel of Luke, the evening meal at Emmaus. Having traveled unrecognized with two of the disciples on the road from Jerusalem, Jesus accepts their invitation to dinner. It appears that he is their guest, that is, until he blesses and breaks the bread, opening their eyes to his identity by presiding over the meal. (I imagine that there was plenty of wine at Emmaus, too.) **Revealing himself as their eternal host, the risen Jesus reignites the disciples' hope, and they return to Jerusalem with a renewed sense of purpose.**⁵

Ultimately, we don't invite Jesus into our lives; he invites us into his. So, what does it mean to join him in the life God wants for all of us? John summarizes Jesus' purpose in the introduction to his Gospel story, only a chapter prior to the story of the wedding feast: "The Word of God became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of

⁵ Luke 24:13-35.

grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”⁶

Grace upon grace, like an unreserved invitation to the table; grace upon grace, like bread to strengthen a weary heart;⁷ grace upon grace, like gallons and gallons of the best wine at the moment you least expect it.⁸

Obviously, none of us could finish all that wine by ourselves. The biblical imagery insists that the grace of God is a feast to be shared widely and happily.

And therein lies the problem with so much religion. We tend to restrict God’s goodness to the arena that our piety will permit. We button up our joy and generosity. But **Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.**⁹

Dear church, let’s allow him to teach us a religion of celebration, and not just any celebration, but the kind that blesses the poor and the stranger, the lonely and the brokenhearted – the kind of celebration that meets the world’s persistent need with persistent grace. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, like a flood of good wine that overflows our cups to fill the cups of others.

⁶ John 1:14, 16.

⁷ Psalm 104:15.

⁸ Karoline Lewis, “Abundance for All,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5276>.

⁹ John 10:10.