



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 3rd Sunday in Epiphany
January 22, 2016

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The passage for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel.

"Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it."

One of the blessings for me of being at St. Stephen's is the opportunity to listen to Fr. Guy's sermons. He is a first class historian as well as theologian, and never fails to deliver some new insight when I listen to him. A favorite theme of his is how differently we would act if we had been in the place of Jesus. Our first miracle would be impactful. It would be loud. It would have the maximum audience. Most importantly, it would unmistakably proclaim our greatness.

By any of those standards, this is a particularly odd and ineffectual accomplishment for a first miracle. Over the years I have struggled, often unsuccessfully, to relate this event to some deep theological insight. But Jesus seems to have picked the one act for His first miracle that defies all attempts at theological speculation.

Of course I have tried to link the transformation of water into wine as a prefiguration of the Eucharist. Father Belt is quick to point out that it seems I make every act of Jesus a prefiguration of the Eucharist. But this one confounds even my natural inclination. Changing water to wine is not the same as mystical translation by the Holy Ghost to transform wine into the Blood of our Savior. The Eucharist is the wedding feast of Jesus as the groom and the church as His Bride, and this miracle also happens at a wedding, however, Jesus is simply a guest at this wedding and not the Bridegroom.

Wine is used historically in the Old Testament to anoint Holy Kings selected by God. In those events, a prophet and the King elect are central figures. In this miracle, Jesus is not so much so. Isaiah, Jeremiah and several psalms connect wine as one of the symbols of abundance that accompany the fulfillment of the Messiah's mission. We could interpret this miracle as the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, but that would be a stretch also. If this was a proclamation, it would seem to be odd that it was made only to the servants, and to nobody else at the wedding.

Perhaps the key to understanding the miracle is that it is the opposite of a grand proclamation of abundance. The bridegroom of this feast has been very foolish. To order a feast, number the guests, and then run out of wine would be a catastrophe. Today, we might see it as a simple faux pas, but that community would have attached a terrible stigma. What should have been the joyous celebration of wedded bliss would have become the derisive symbol of miserliness, a lack of hospitality, or at best a terrible carelessness. There is a continual thread of disdain in the Old Testament for the general who would fight a war without having enough men, or the builder who would start a house without enough supplies. This wedding would by extension earn the derision of that community.

It is within the context of this impending condemnation by society and culture that the extraordinary nature of this first miracle is revealed. Saving the face of the bridegroom, saving the celebration for the community, is not an act of self -

aggrandizement. It is not the foundation of a contrived affectation of deep theology. This miracle is a simple act of kindness, charity extended to a man who had depended upon himself, his own calculations and his own means, and who, like us, found his cunning and his possessions to be inadequate. The delivery of the bridegroom was dependent upon the mercy and kindness of Jesus. It was a gift that was extended even though the man had not earned it, even though he had not even requested it.

When Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees in an attempt to get him into trouble by identifying the greatest of the laws, He did not reflect on the ten Commandments, or the dietary and societal laws given to guide the Jews on their transit to the Promised Land. He did not refer to the commentaries of the Jewish scholars or the elements of Temple worship. He encapsulated the meaning and purpose of God given law to two simple requirements. First, love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and souls and strength. Second, Love our neighbors as ourselves. This first miracle is the manifestation of the very heart of his teaching. Be charitable. Be kind to each other. This seemingly odd miracle is actually a perfect first miracle.

And Jesus teaches us about its importance as the way He wants us to reflect His kindness to the world. He shows us how to be charitable and kind by His actions, and not simply by His Words. If you ask the kids how I do with living the Gospel, I am embarrassed to say that I too often teach by telling them what they should do, “or else”. Rather than explain to them how and why they should do what I ask, too often the answer is an aggravated, “because I said so.”

By contrast, Jesus teaches us what it means to be charitable by His actions at this feast. There isn’t any “or else” in His lesson, and there is no, “Because I said so.” Instead, he shows us how we are to be kind by living that kindness for our example.

First, he teaches us charity is born from sacrifice. We have extreme examples, such as Abraham’s willingness to offer his only son, or the Shunamite woman offering Elisha that last food she had to stave off hunger for herself and her child. We have the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus makes for us because of His mercy and kindness. But in this miracle Jesus tells us that charity is not something to be reserved for desperate and heroic times.

Charity is also the little sacrifices of every day life. When Mary comes to Jesus to tell Him of the Bridegroom’s problem, He answers her, “Woman,

what have I to do with thee. My hour has not yet come.” It sounds like such an odd response to us, but what Jesus is really saying is that her request comes an inconvenient time. He is supposed to be off duty. This is no great emergency and this man is no close kin or friend of His. And yet, He responds to her request.

The kids only seem to need my time at the end of a long and frustrating day. Carolyn will need to discuss the frustrations of her day just after kickoff of a playoff game. That person who needs time to express their needs will always get the courage to ask just when we need to be on the way to someplace important. Visiting the sick happens late at night, or in the middle of a crisis. It is never convenient, only important. Charity with our time and our patience doesn’t seem great and heroic, but when we make the sacrifice, the person in need is blessed, we are blessed, and the Gospel is preached to people who we may not know are watching.

Jesus performs this miracle with humility. There is no great fanfare. He doesn’t call the crowd together. He doesn’t pull the host aside. He takes no credit at all. The only people who know about his kindness at all are the servants. Think about it, the people who know are the ones who have incentive to hide it. You know they would be blamed if the wine ran out, or could take credit for finding more.. And yet, they are the witnesses of record.

Finally, Jesus offered up not just enough, but the very best. The steward chastised the host that he had saved the best wine for last. Jesus expects that it will be our best that characterizes our kindness as well. We are to give our full attention to those who need us rather than just glance up between texts or plays. We are to hear out those who need us without looking at our watches. We are to take the time and effort to share the best of what we have even when it is inconvenient and when there will be no glory for doing so.

What are we learn from the simplicity of this first miracle. Just this, we are to imitate Jesus in His kindness. We can respond to Him the way His Mother advised the servants. “Whatever He asks you to do, do it.” Especially, if what He asks is that we simply be kind.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen