

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

On the heels of the mysterious, miraculous, and perhaps even scandalous birth of the Savior in Bethlehem at Christmastime, the season of Epiphany helps begin a time of shedding some light on the importance of it all. When Jesus is baptized by his cousin John, as we heard last week, the questions begin to accumulate. Just who is this person who seems so full of peace and determination, who carries himself with such a compelling air of authority, and to whom even the popular Baptizer is quick to be deferential? Who is he really? And what has he to do with us? Can we truly and fully know his identity? My guess is that we each come to know him personally over time, and that no matter what title the world, or even the church, chooses to write on his nametag, there will always be questions about how his significance is received in our lives. But even having the questions to keep asking, having these mysteries to keep pondering, is in itself a remarkable advantage and joy.

Our four official Gospel Books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all agree about the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River when he was a young adult. But then, when they begin to tell the story about how his identity became to be revealed to the people, they diverge in the material they choose to highlight. One of the first defining acts of ministry in Matthew's Gospel, for example, is the Sermon on the Mount, revealing Jesus as a teaching lecturer with extraordinary insight. Mark begins his stories about Jesus with exorcism, revealing the divine power Jesus has over demonic evil. Luke tells about Jesus returning to his roots, to his hometown, and next week we'll hear how that turns out. But for John, the revelation of Jesus, the first sign of his great power, comes when he is the life of the party at a wedding! Egged-on by his mother, he reluctantly but exquisitely, changes some 150 gallons of water into the best wine anyone has ever tasted, saving the day for the bride and groom.

So, in John's account, we first hear of Jesus' miraculous powers not by a compassionate healing or even a wise and intriguing parable, but by an act which seems frivolous at best. And, to top it all off, Jesus doesn't even take credit for the miracle, but allows the bride's father, by default, to get the praise. No public display of divinity, no booming thunderclaps, not even a bit of applause directed towards him. Only the wine stewards, the wedding planner, the disciples, and Jesus' mother (Not given a name in John's Gospel BTW) know that he has caused this change. It will be up to them to spread the news by gossip and rumor, but for the time being, Jesus steps back from the stage lights, out of the limelight. It all seems an odd choice, doesn't it? Why would John choose this event to highlight the beginning of Jesus' ministry among the people?

When we look back at the beginning verses of John's Gospel, at what is often called the prologue to his book, we find this verse: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.' Full of grace. This is John's thesis about the identity of Jesus; that he is full of grace. It is not enough to say that Jesus *has* grace, for, from John's perspective, Jesus is *full* of grace. But, what does that mean? Even if we completely accept John's witness, his eye-witness, how does that lead us to an epiphany of our own? How does it help us to lead lives of faith in Jesus' name? For it still begs the question 'what is grace?', and grace is an elusive concept. Defining 'grace' as unconditional love, as we sometimes do, leads only to wondering just what that love really is. And yes, church leaders over

the centuries have meticulously developed doctrines meant to explain grace to us, as if hearing their explanations will be enough of an epiphany for us. But, I think, grace may be something which ought to be experienced rather than explained. Jesus' fullness of grace may be something we can only fully appreciate when we see it, or feel it, or taste it. John's experience of Jesus, apparently, was one of a divine being who was also a human being who brought elusive grace into the world with the intention of making it abundant and available for all to experience. And the changing of those many gallons of water into wine was to be a sign. Not a definitive answer to life's most perplexing questions, but a sign of abundant grace.

The season of Epiphany, despite its reputation for shining light into dark mysterious corners, is, I think, more about asking and living with wise questions than it is about knowing the final answers. So, how does this wonder which Jesus accomplishes make you wonder? How does this sign Jesus posts at the wedding in the village of Cana point you in a better direction? How does it help you experience what grace really looks, feels, and tastes like? Jesus changes things. Jesus changes water into wine. At the right moment. So, you might ask after hearing about this sign, could befriending and accompanying him put you in a position to experience change? Could participating in Jesus' ministry even bring change in your daily life? However impossible it might seem, however unlikely it appears to be, can the very presence of Jesus at the events of your life be a promise of fortunate and welcome change?

And not just any change, mind you, but a change, a transformation, of the ordinary to the extraordinary. Whatever you might think of wine, in the Biblical record wine is somehow an improvement over the water which was generally available. With no water treatment facilities around, the quality of water was certainly suspect, and alcohol was seen as helpful, I suppose. The Bible scriptures are full of memories when wine was served to celebrate and honor, and was a sign of better things to come. In any case, the presence of Jesus, who was, as John says, full of grace, made a difference, and made a change possible. Not just in droplets, but in gallons! Notice that Jesus didn't just intervene and secretly have more wine delivered, but took the opportunity to demonstrate the quantity and quality of the changes God's grace can manage. The sign John describes at this wedding feast can reveal this wisdom, and set our questioning on a more fruitful path. As each of the Gospel authors tell their accounts of the beginnings of Jesus earthly ministry and mission, I encourage you to listen with the ears of your hearts for the clues which can clarify your questions.

And listen to your mother! Jesus may have been reluctant to show off the power he thought he might have had, but his mother knew that this would be a good opportunity to give an amazing sign! A problem to be solved, a team of disciples to help out, a need to be met, and, of all things, a wedding! What better place to highlight the possibilities of a life of grace, to highlight the prospects for new and fruitful change, to underscore God's desire to put the icing on the cake, so to speak. And we, in a few minutes, will be invited to sacramentally join the party and the joyful dance, as we, too, open ourselves up to the possibilities for change in our holy Eucharist. And change both of quantity and quality, both of intent and action, a change which enjoys the benefits of God's everlasting grace. In Cana, Jesus wonders if his time has finally come, but we have been assured that his mother was right, that his time has indeed come. Jesus will be the path to an eternal life of joy. And in our Holy Communion, Jesus will again be the life of the party. Amen.