

by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 20, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

“There’s nothing worth doing that isn’t worth overdoing.” Thus spoke one of my delightfully irreverent college friends. Impudent as that sounds, it echoes one commentary about the first of Jesus’ signs recorded in John’s Gospel. Scripture scholar Silvano Fausti says that this story “tries to show us in one fell swoop how scandalously distinct God is from what we would imagine.”

Really, what wedding celebration needs 600 liters of wine? But that is the story John tells us. The theological message seems to be that God is willing to go to extremes — and not necessarily the kind people ordinarily preach about.

While we have probably heard that the wedding at Cana showed Jesus’ blessing of marriage, the story falls miserably short on marital details. The only member of the wedding party who even gets mentioned is the anonymous groom, and his only role is to hear that the new wine is better than the old.

The principal characters in the story are two of the wedding guests: Jesus and his mother. The secondary characters are servants. The family, disciples, bridesmaids, etc., are just extras. The entire plot flows around the wine. John the Baptist and his ascetic friends would be shocked!

Obviously, this is not a story about marriage and family. Nevertheless, it is a story about a marriage feast. In John’s Gospel, it is the first act in the Messiah’s mission to

bring the union of God and humanity to fulfillment.

John the Evangelist called this the first of Jesus' "signs," events we often think of as miracles. But Jesus' signs were far more than one-time miracles. They were portents of things to come. Jesus' signs announced that something radically new was happening. We could consider the sign of the wedding wine as a living parable, a performance that explained Jesus' first declaration of his mission when he said: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand!" (Mark 1:15).

John pays almost no attention to the actual bride and groom because this story is about the marriage of God and the people. The wedding without wine is the situation in which the old traditions, like the empty ceremonial jars, have lost their power.

This wedding is a lifeless liturgy. The principal players are nameless, the disciples are mere bystanders. People go through the motions, but there is no passion. It is as if they think this is what they are supposed to do, but they have no idea why they still believe in it. Anybody could do what they are doing and it would make no difference.

Then the mother of Jesus enters the scene. As the representative of Israel's hope, as Israel's potential to give life, she protests. A wedding without wine is a liturgy with no passion — a sacrilege.

The ever-enigmatic Jesus responds that his hour has not yet come. But Mother Israel, trusting that prayer will never go unheard, tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Like Moses who bid his people to choose life, she instructed God's servants to obey Jesus' word.

This brings the scene to its climax. Jesus asks the servants to do something utterly simple. He instructs them to fill their empty ceremonial jars. He tells them to fulfill the religious practices they had allowed to fall into neglect. Their obedience provided him with the raw material for working his sign. When they filled the jars to the brim, they demonstrated whole-heartedness and God had something new to work with.

In a story that will be echoed in the account of the loaves and fishes, Jesus took the little they could provide and transformed it into an overabundance. John tells us that this event marked the first revelation of Jesus' glory and that the disciples began to believe in him.

According to the Gospel of John, this was Jesus' primordial sign, the event that foreshadowed everything that was to come. Jesus said that his time had not yet come, but Mary believed that his very presence meant that the time was ripe.

We may be living in the same time zone as the guests at Cana. Too many of us have become accustomed to dryness. Like impassive wedding guests, we go through the motions of the ceremonies without great expectations. The real scandal highlighted in this story is not wine, but passivity.

Mary refused to accept a wedding feast without joy. More agitator than mediator, she took the problem to Jesus and then told the servants to pay attention to his command. She was convinced of God's extravagance, but her people had become docile to the point of unbelief.

Today she asks us if we want things to be different, if we are willing to risk the experience of God's lavish love. If so, it is time to turn to Jesus and do whatever he tells us. It is time for great expectations.

ISAIAH 62:1-5

Today's selection from Isaiah sounds like leftovers from the holidays. Why are we talking kings beholding Israel's glory this many weeks after Christmas? In mid-January, we wonder what the promise of vindication and renaming has to do with the beginnings of the season of Ordinary Time and the Gospel story of the wedding at Cana. In his commentary on Isaiah, John Oswalt suggests that we read this passage through the prism of relationships, and particularly through the scriptural symbol of God taking Israel as a spouse.

Chapters 60-62 of Isaiah deal with God's promises to redeem Israel from being forsaken and desolate. Oswalt suggests that contemporary society often mirrors Zion's sense of desolation. Zion understood her plight as a result of her unfaithfulness. As a people who would not maintain a commitment, they lost their identity. They were no one because they stood for nobody and nothing.

Coinciding with much of what Pope Francis teaches, Oswalt suggests that self-concern and individualism may be the tragic and ironic causes of contemporary desolation. He comments, "We live in a time of strange paradoxes. … We have never had such emphasis on self-esteem coupled with such a high suicide rate."

This underlines the idea that personhood is a relational reality and that individualism and exaggerated self-concern pave the road to desolation. We become persons through the relationships that draw us forth and give us identity as daughter/son, sister/brother, parent/child, friend, student, worker, etc. Relationship is the heart of our human vocation and its goal. The purpose of human life is to grow in ever-deepening relationship with God and all of creation.

This relates to our selection from Isaiah in that God's offer of redemption is ultimately an invitation to relationship. God promises to rename the people who had made themselves "forsaken" and "desolate." They will soon be called "my delight" and "espoused." This people's primary identity will be based on how much God loves them.

God's love is so intense that it can only be symbolized by the love of spouses: a commitment of love which people freely choose to make and keep, a commitment which becomes fruitful and gives life to the world.

Isaiah has a particular concept of God in mind in writing this. This is no God-judge on the lookout for trespassers. Isaiah's God watches to woo. God's desire is to entice this people into becoming all they are meant to be as images of the God who loves them.

PSALM 96:1-2, 2-3, 7-8, 9-10

Most authors refer to this as an enthronement psalm. In his study of the psalms found in the text Una Comunidad lee los Salmos, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi calls it a hymn to the Lord as king, an idea that makes a little more sense to contemporary people.

The refrain is a call to give witness: "Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations." Of course, to do that, we must first consider the ways in which we have been aware of God's action in our world. Repeating this chorus invites us to what Ignatian spirituality calls the Examen, a daily review of our experiences of grace. When we think of spreading this word to the nations, we realize that it is not simply our personal life that we should examine, but what is happening in our world. Praying this psalm commits us to discerning the signs of God's grace in the totality of our experiences.

When we begin to see God’s activity in our world, we are ready to sing a new song and bless God’s name. That is the call of the first stanza.

The second stanza reminds us that our witness should be as public as possible. This gives us the opportunity to counteract what is too often the negative content of our newscasts and daily conversations. When we become aware of the movements of the Spirit and promulgate what we are seeing, we are becoming heralds who can open others’ eyes and uplift their spirits.

The third stanza’s call to worship and trembling accentuates everything that has been sung before. We tremble in “fear of the Lord” when we find ourselves awestruck at God’s grandeur. When we get a glimpse of God’s goodness and truth, we can hardly help but “Say among the nations: The Lord is king.”

Praying this psalm opens us to an ever-new way of singing God’s praise. Just as God’s grace is new each day, so each day we can sing a new song. The more we proclaim God’s glory, the more we become aware of it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11

This year’s cycle of readings has us pick up Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians near its conclusion. From the beginning, Paul has called the Corinthians to humility and a realistic assessment of their gifts. He undercut their contentiousness and claims to wisdom by pointing out the foolish appearance of the message of the cross, reminding them that God’s weakness confounds human might.

Rivalry was a primary pitfall in which the Corinthians took up emotional residence. Some of them had received charismatic gifts or special powers and were more than ready to flaunt them. They treasured such signs of supposed holiness and superiority. Yet Paul would have nothing of it.

When we read this passage carefully, we see that Paul describes a diversity of gifts as essential to God’s own being. Paul’s language reveals an incipient sense of Trinity. He says that different forms of service have their roots in the same Lord, different gifts come from the same Spirit, and different works come from the same God. In this, he subtly refers to three persons in God as part of his insistence that unity in diversity is a divine characteristic.

Paul’s insistence that the community recognize the value of diversity is at the heart of this letter. Because of that, 1 Corinthians might be one of the most important letters from the Christian Scriptures for today’s world. We who have become caught up in black and white dichotomies find it difficult to appreciate diversity. Our system of education has often formed us to see the world through a competitive lens which judges everything on a scale of better or worse and a belief that there is but one correct answer. Such thinking undergirds every form of prejudice and blinds us to the richness of God’s creation.

But Paul tells us that diversity is a divine gift. Because all talents and abilities come from God, none of them can be disparaged without denigrating the God who gives them. And as he will emphasize more as the letter goes on, every gift is given for the benefit of the community, not for the honor of a particular member.

The bottom line of Paul’s message is that the more we can appreciate diversity, the more we can open ourselves to God. Therefore, the inverse of that attitude, the elevation of certain gifts over others, becomes an expression of idolatry.

JOHN 2:1-11

We begin this season of Ordinary Time with John’s narrative about Jesus’ first public activity at the wedding at Cana. While we refer to this as a wedding story, John never mentions the bride and barely alludes to the groom. Jesus teaches nothing about human marriage or family in this story. None of that is especially surprising when we remember that in the Gospel of John we rarely get what we expect and are always treated to more than we might have imagined. This story will play out like a theatrical presentation.

The two characters who really matter in this story are Jesus and his mother. Servants take second place while the disciples populate the sidelines. John invites us to this wedding because marriage is the favorite scriptural symbol of God’s desire for loving union with humanity. But this wedding is short on wine; the relationship between God and the people is sorely lacking in the love and joy that were the reasons for which God initiated the relationship.

That problem brings Jesus’ mother to center stage. John never names her, not because he didn’t know her name, but because throughout his Gospel she symbolizes more than her own person and moment in history. Here, Mary represents the people of God, the chosen ones through whom God eventually sent the Messiah

to the world. Like the prophets, she cries out, reminding God of humanity's need. With exquisite simplicity, she only says, "They have no wine." Those words described Israel's plight; the lack of the wine that symbolizes the joy of life and love was intolerable.

Jesus' response to Mary has various translations; it is an idiom in the language of diplomacy among Jesus' people. If we translate it as, "Woman, what does that have to do with us?" we begin to understand the dynamic at play. First of all, by addressing her as "woman," Jesus has picked up on the wedding theme. He addresses her not as his mother, but as Israel who is called to be the spouse of God. Jesus' question implies that they represent the two sides of the covenant which is in need of attention.

Here for the first time, Jesus mentions his hour, the reason for his being. He tells Mary that his hour has not come. Jesus' hour, the fulfillment of his vocation to unite humanity with God, is a decisive moment, but it is also a reality wherever he is present. Thus, although his hour has not "come," it is already in process. Therefore, Mary can tell the servants to fulfill their human vocation: "Do whatever he tells you."

We know the rest of the story. The six stone jars, as empty as the law once engraved on Moses' stone tablets, are waiting to be filled with newness. The wine that came from the jars symbolized divine love offered again, just when people recognized their need.

At Cana, Jesus performed the first and primary of his signs. The wedding feast symbolized the renewed covenant. At this wedding feast, Jesus acted out a living parable of the announcement he made in the Nazareth synagogue: "Today, this is fulfilled" among you.

This happened at the beginning of John's Gospel, during the first week of Jesus' three-year ministry. Like the disciples who watched it all, as we begin a new liturgical year, we are invited to start from the beginning again. Now, rather than just watching from the sidelines, we are called to find our way to be the mother who calls out for help and the servants who do whatever he tells us.

Planning: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Lawrence Mick

This is the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time; the First Sunday was replaced by the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Even though we are no longer in the Christmas/Epiphany season, we find echoes of it in today's readings. The Gospel account of the miracle at the wedding at Cana brings us the third event that was once part of the Solemnity of the Epiphany: the visit of the Magi, the baptism of the Lord, and the wedding at Cana. All three were events that revealed who Jesus really was and pointed to his mission. In our current Lectionary, we hear this account only in Cycle C.

There is a natural tendency to focus on Christian marriage, since the Cana story takes place at a wedding. That's not unreasonable, but it is important to recognize that marriage is not the primary focus of the Gospel account. The miraculous transformation of water into wine signals the beginning of the new age that Jesus came to inaugurate. We can still link this to marriage, however, since that new age was seen in the Bible as a time when God would marry God's people, as our first reading makes clear: "As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you." Scholars suggest that John recounts this miracle at a wedding to highlight that theme.

If you do focus on marriage, make sure to focus beyond married couples to the sign or sacrament that they are called to be. Married love, St. Paul reminds us, is a symbol of Christ's love for the church or, more broadly, God's love for humanity. Planners might draw from the Cana imagery today when crafting petitions.

This week brings the start of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25). In the second reading, Paul gives us the basis of our unity with all those who are in Christ: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone." That certainly applies to the various churches that follow Christ. How will your parish observe this week: with a joint prayer service with neighboring churches, with a prayer novena at home, or in some other way? Materials for the observance can be found at www.atonementfriars.org or from your diocesan ecumenical office.

Tuesday of this week, January 22, is the anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the U.S. The date is designated as a Day of Prayer for the Legal Protection of Unborn Children. Resources for the day can be

found at www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/resources/january-22-day-of-prayer.cfm

Prayers: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

From the beginning of and throughout his ministry, Jesus revealed who he was. Today's first reading describes God's relationship with Israel in spousal terms, so it is not surprising that Jesus' first sign took place at a wedding feast. All that he did was essentially about God's unending love for us. Every aspect of life, including marriage, can speak to us of this deep, pervading, unifying love. How is that expressed in our own particular lives?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you came among us to show us the depth of God's love for us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your first sign took place at the wedding feast at Cana: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to recognize and demonstrate God's love in our own lives: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Blessed to be God's beloved people, we pray now for the needs of all God's people.

Minister For all members of the church — laity and clergy, women and men, that we may use our gifts to reveal what God is doing on behalf of all people, we pray:

- For married people everywhere, especially where poverty or illness, violence or politics have injured relationships; for legislation that supports couples who cannot work or who lack adequate medical or mental health care, we pray:
- For those preparing for marriage, those struggling in their marriages, and those whose marriages have failed; and for individuals and programs that support

spouses at every step of their journey, we pray:

- For the honesty to examine our own attitudes and actions toward others, as we are about to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, the Week of Christian Unity, and the anniversary of Roe v. Wade, we pray:
- For the growth and success of our ministries, which depend upon the generous use of the unique, but different gifts of this community; and for those who cannot participate in these ministries because of illness or other limitations, we pray:
- For a commitment to creatively share our faith with family members and friends, co-workers and neighbors through our words, actions and parish ministries, we pray:

Presider God, who rejoices in your people, we pray that we may be equal to the deep love you have always bestowed on us. Help us to use the gifts you give us for the benefit of this community and all your beloved people, and strengthen us when we falter. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the great sign of your love. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle C Sunday Resources** feature series. View the full series.