

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
John 2: 1-11
“Ordinary Signs”
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 17, 2016

The author of the Gospel according to John tells the stories of Jesus in a markedly different manner than do the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the Synoptic Gospels. John presents a Jesus who spends most of his time in Jerusalem rather than in Galilee, a Jesus who does not habitually speak in parables but rather engages in long, solemn, abstract monologues or dialogues where “I am...” replaces “the Kingdom of God is like...” (1) In John, Jesus performs “signs,” rather than “miracles.”

Today’s Scripture lesson tells of the first of these signs.

.....

On Christmas Eve, just before we lit candles and raised them high in the darkened sanctuary and just before we sang “Silent Night” and “Joy to the World” into the mystery of that holy night, we read these words from the first chapter of John: The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...from his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace.

From his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace.

So we read in John 1.

What then does grace that we have all received....look like? Taste like? Smell like? Sound like? Feel like?

John 2 is the gospel writer’s answer to this question.

Here are some things that are helpful to know about John 2 as we seek to discern how John answers this question about how we experience grace.

First, it is important to know that the Gospel according to John simply drips with metaphor and symbol. It is particularly the case with today’s scripture lesson.

For example, the passage that we have read today begins, “on the third day.” On the third day...where else do we hear this? When it refers to Jesus’s resurrection, of course. When John writes “on the third day,” he isn’t simply ticking off dates on the calendar. He is leaning in toward his readers and giving us a wink that says, “what you are about to read may seem to be ordinary time on the calendar, but hidden within the ordinary tick-tock of time is the promise of transformed possibilities, the reality of Easter resurrection.

And the setting of a wedding feast is laden with symbolism too.

A standard motif in Jewish theological thought was the messianic banquet. This was used as a potent symbol for the joys of the coming age—it would be like a great banquet with a table groaning under the weight of unending food and wine. The prophet Isaiah spoke of how on that day the people of God would gather to celebrate the feast of salvation, and the people would come from all the nations of the earth and gather at the feast before God. Consequently, when the wine suddenly begins to run out, there is a double meaning. It is not only an embarrassment for the bridal couple and their families who were hosting the wedding reception; it threatens the promise of the messianic banquet as the point toward which all history, all life, all faith is heading, and thus, it threatens the well-being of the entire earth.

And while the primary background for the story’s symbolism is the Jewish messianic banquet, the symbolism would also make sense to a purely Greek audience as well. For the Greeks, Dionysus, the god of wine, was one of the most powerful and ubiquitous of all the gods, since he was present in the wine at any banquet. Dionysus could provide wine in a miraculous way and was often said to have done so in Greek myth. Jesus would here be seen to be supplanting the Greek god of wine and presenting himself as “the Creator of the Fruit of the Vine,” as Jews termed God in their traditional benediction over wine.

As the sign of the messianic age, the transformation of water into wine also picks up on another motif in John. The jars of water were present for Jewish purification rituals. Jesus is seen to reinterpret Jewish ritual by replacing the water of purification with the fine wine of celebration. It is a theme that will be repeated again and again in John as Jesus will consistently reinterpret Jewish tradition. (2)

Finally, what is up with John labeling what happens here as a sign, rather than a miracle?

I think that it has something to do with the way that we view miracles as compared with how we view signs. Miracles are extraordinary. Signs are ordinary.

I was struck by this during the past week when I read that the Knight Foundation has announced that there are ten Charlotte projects which have been named as finalists for grants to fund ideas to help make cities more successful. One of these projects was submitted by one Sarah Hazel and bears the name, "Can Do Signs." The project rethinks municipal signs that typically tell people "what not to do." This project aims to spur fun, imagination, and positivity by creating signs that say, "You can dance! You can sing! You can skip!" I really want to meet this Sarah Hazel because she and someone else submitted another proposal that is entitled "Dancin' In the Street." This proposal aims to replace those walking-man street-crossing signals with a dancing animation which is paired with dance music and other prompts to encourage people to dance across the street in uptown Charlotte. (3)

I love it, don't you?

And I believe that this is something of what John is intending when he tells a story about Jesus's turning ordinary tap water that was sitting around waiting to be used for a tired old religious ritual into \$150 a bottle Gran Reserva and calls it a "sign." He is saying that God whom we know as Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit can turn everything that is ordinary in our lives into something amazing.

From his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace.

At our staff meeting this past week, I asked people to name something that they would label as ordinary. They said, among other things...

Laundry

Washing dishes

Email

Driving the kids to school

Studying

Knocking down three pointers if you are Steph Curry (Did I mention that Steph Curry was at our staff meeting?)

Not many of us are Steph Curry, but we all have to get our laundry done. Laundry is probably the most democratic thing there is; everyone has to do it, or figure out how to get it done.

Not many of us think of laundry as a spiritual thing, a sign of God's grace.

However, the noted poet and writer Kathleen Norris does. She presented a series of lectures on the connection between laundry and liturgy at St. Mary's College of Notre Dame, later published as a book entitled *The Quotidian Mysteries*. (4) In her book *The Cloister Walk*, she writes "laundry seems to have an almost religious importance for many women. We groan about the drudgery but seldom talk about the secret pleasure we feel at being able to make dirty things clean, especially the clothes of our loved ones, which possess an intimacy all their own." When she pictures Honolulu's Chinatown, circa 1960, which she passed through daily on a school bus, what she smells is the open-air fish market and what she sees in the colorful laundry strung up between tenements. The laundry announced to her that families lived there and that someone cared. (5)

What does the fullness of God's grace smell like, taste like, sound like, look like, feel like? It smells like an open-air fish market. It tastes like a sandwich that your mom has put in the lunchbox that is beside you on the school bus seat. It looks like colorful laundry strung up between tenements that sends a message that families live there and someone cares.

Such are the ordinary signs that God gives us all to reveal grace, beauty and truth.

These are signs to us if, of course, we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the senses to smell and taste and touch the amazing grace and beauty that is in the ordinary.

One of the things that is notable in John's gospel is that signs can conceal, as well as reveal, grace, beauty, and holiness. This is what we see in John's account of the wedding at Cana. It is like a series of concentric circles.

Some get the point.

Some ooh and aah.

Others scratch their heads and confer with others.

Others see and hear nothing at all. (6)

This is who we all are at one time or another when it comes to seeing the fullness of God's grace in the midst of the ordinary routines of our lives. Sometimes we see and hear nothing at all. Sometimes we scratch our heads and confer with others in theological debate. Sometimes we ooh and aah. Sometimes we get the point.

John tells the story so that we will more and more, as each day dawns anew, get the point.

As the poem on the front of today's bulletin asks us,

If Jesus could transform common water into wedding wine/spit and dirt into new sight/troubled sea into a pathway/well water into living water/ Could Christ transform the waters of my life/shallow/murky/polluted/stagnant/sour/into a shower of blessing? (7)

John's story of the wedding at Cana is the answer. And the answer is yes.

Last Tuesday when I asked the staff about ordinary things. Jane Cain responded "walking to work..." And so on this MLK I would close with a story about the ordinary sign of walking to work.

Mother Pollard was one of the participants in the 1955-1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. She was in her 70s, and she needed her job so she did what she needed to do. She walked to work. Martin Luther King Jr. recounted in his writings that after several weeks of walking to her destinations rather than take the bus, Mother Pollard was asked if she was tired, to which she replied, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested."

It became a rallying cry for the civil rights movement. And today, it is a sign that the God whom we know as Jesus and as Holy Spirit has the power to transform everything that is ordinary in our lives into something that is full of beautiful, holy, powerful, amazing and full grace upon grace.

1. Raymond E. Brown, "The Johannine World for Preachers," *Interpretation* 43/1, January 1989, 59.
2. Phyllis Williams Provost and Barbara McBride-Smith in *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: John*, Dennis E. Smith and Michael E. Williams, editors (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 43-44.
3. Corey Inscoe, "10 Charlotte projects named finalists for grants," *The Charlotte Observer*, January 14, 2016.
4. Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and "Women's Work,"* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).
5. Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 283.
6. Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 25.
7. Tom Lane, "If Jesus Could," *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 1*, United Church Press, 1994.