

Second Sunday after Epiphany—Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
January 17, 2016

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

I come to you with a terrible confession. I know it seems a little early in our relationship to be sharing my deep, dark secrets, but I believe in coming clean. My confession is this: I have preached on this Gospel story probably 25 times. I'll tell you why, and I don't come off looking that great.

Preaching on a story 25 times doesn't seem at first to be such a grave sin. But the REASON I've heard the story of the Wedding at Cana so many times is a little dodgy. I have officiated at many, many weddings. And at some point during the pre-marital counseling, the couple invariably asks what I think they should choose for their scripture reading. And, I usually say, "well, you know: I think the wedding at Cana is a really good Gospel reading." And, almost always, the couple goes for it. Which is great for me, because I already have that sermon written.

I briefly considered using that wedding sermon this morning, but I figured you would begin getting suspicious when I started talking about the lovely bride and the handsome groom. And, it seems a little early in our relationship to start recycling sermons, so I'll try something fresh.

Let me lay the scene: Jesus, in the Gospel of John, has come to a party. A wedding feast, to be precise. The whole town is present. And then there's a crisis. The party has completely run out of wine. I don't know if the family didn't plan very well or if the crowd were particularly thirsty, but the party is in full swing, and the wine jugs are empty.

Jesus' mother knows that Jesus can fix the problem. She knows her son is special. But Jesus is reluctant; he's not ready to reveal himself to the world just yet. His mother is having none of it, and she insists that he fix the problem IMMEDIATELY.

And he does. He whips up a batch of the most perfect wine so that that party can continue.

Sit with this for a moment. The Saviour of the world, and the God that we all worship has decided that his first public miracle should be to make sure a feast can continue. What a fantastic take on the nature of God. God likes a party. God shows up at a wedding.

This is a bit of different take than the one we might be more used to—God with a white beard, sitting on some remote throne, doing whatever it is that throne-sitting Gods do.

But that's not the picture that the Gospel of John paints. Instead, we have a God who walks into a party with his mother and makes sure that the feast can happen. That's the kind of God that we worship.

Theologians have spent countless years and miles of paper writing about the essential nature of God. Is God omnipotent? Is not omniscient? Is God kind? And how do we know?

Our Episcopal tradition doesn't take a lot of time trying to figure out the essential nature of God. In some ways, it's a fool's errand. How could we possibly know the mind of God? But we can know an awful lot about God's nature when we look at the person of Jesus. Who he spent time with. What he did with his time. Where he lived. When he broke bread. How he preached.

These are the things that we can know. And in this Gospel story today, we can rest easy in the sure knowledge that our God likes a party. Our God likes a feast.

There are a few parishes in Chicago that have a peculiar tradition. At the Eucharist at Christmas and at Easter—the biggest services of the year—rather than using regular wine, these parishes will use champagne.

Imagine sitting in your pew while the deacon is setting the table and hearing this enormous POP! as the champagne cork shoots toward the ceiling of the church. The first time I experienced it, I'll admit it was a bit strange. But after I starting thinking about it, I realized that, what the priests were trying to convey with the sparkling wine is this: our feast around this table is joyful. Our God is a God concerned with the feeding of the spirit as well as the body—of the need for celebration and revelry. Of course there is a time for seriousness and for sorrow. We will see that as Jesus gets closer to the cross and our congregation gets closer to Lent.

But for now, I hope we will take from this story a little bit of grace, a little bit of wisdom. That Jesus makes God known in the things we can touch and experience—in bread and in wine; in water and in fire; in feasting and happy company. That is God, and don't let anyone tell you differently.

Just a small warning: our human nature will sometimes whisper for us to keep this party to ourselves. And that is not the way of the Gospel. Once we know that there is a feast going on, the only thing for a Christian to do is to tell EVERYONE about it. Every empty pew is a little bit sad. We know about the party, and I wonder if we're doing a good enough job telling the neighborhood about it.

At this table every week, I raise up the cup of wine and say, "The Gifts of God for the People of God." I don't say, "The Gifts of God for SOME of the People of God." I say that this feast is for everyone. And I mean it. So come. Invite your friends and your neighbors. We will never run out of bread, and we will never run out of wine. Because God provides. God always provides abundantly. Amen.