

SERMON FOR YEAR C, SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – 10 A.M. SERVICE

JOHN 2:1-11

BY THE REV. TOREY LIGHTCAP  
SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

JANUARY 17, 2010

“CUPS”

The gospel lesson with which we have just been comforted  
(And are soon to be afflicted)  
Teaches us of the inescapable and immeasurable grace of God  
As realized in the miraculous work of Jesus Christ.

In his gospel, John makes this the “first” miracle of Jesus,  
And the Greek of it means to have us understand that the conversion of water into wine  
Isn't so much the first-in-sequence of his miracles,  
As it is “the beginning” of something great that will soon follow on.  
This is not “the first” miracle, in and of itself; it's only ... a *taste*.

As always, the miracles of Jesus seem to exist  
In order to point **not** to the miracles themselves,  
But to the one who is performing them.  
In the gospels, Jesus is for ever doing miracles and getting people's attention,  
And *then*, when he has a captive audience, teaching them about the Kingdom.  
*Look here! Look!* he says. *I have something to tell you.*  
Only now he has no need of words for them.  
It is the *steward* who remarks to the bridegroom, “You have kept the good wine until now.”

I can imagine all this being said with a cocked head and a quizzical expression.  
*Friend, why would you give us the good wine*  
*When we're not fit to know it's any good?*  
*Why pour out a fine wine when the people are too snookered*  
*To know the difference?*

And why so much of it? Why so *much* fine wine?  
How could we stand it? How could we ever hope to drink it all?

We hear the story and we think, *Well, six jars' worth: how much could that really be?*  
Maybe 150 gallons!  
That's 2,400 cups' worth!  
And that's an awful lot of wine.

Can you imagine being a guest of this wedding party?  
When the host invited you to come, he asked you to bring along one stone jar  
That could be filled with water for purification rites  
(This is a wedding, after all, and what house has *six* of these things laying around?);  
So you happily obliged, but now you find that your jar has been *sullied* by this wine.

What a pain in the neck!  
To get this jar back into sacramental shape will mean scrubbing it down,  
Working hard at all the little crevices, washing it out multiple times,  
And then, probably, taking it to a priest to have it reconsecrated.  
And that priest – make no mistake –  
Will do the white glove test before he signs off on that jar to bless it.  
It will be absolutely imperative that not a drop of wine remain in that jar.

Now, please don't get to thinking that this is some historical artifact.  
Because it is *precisely* what we do.  
We are the wedding guest who has to haul that jar all the way back home,  
And who is thinking the whole time of how much work it's going to take  
Before it can ever be used again.  
We thought the miracle failed to consider our feelings when it happened,  
And we are the ones who will be left to deal with it afterwards.  
This single guy, this itinerant Jesus knows nothing of being a householder;  
He isn't the one who's going to have to haul out the brushes,  
And *he's* the one who did it.  
Oh well. Scrub, scrub.

How we miss the point!  
How we miss the point by a mile when it's staring right at us –  
All 2,400 cups' worth of the point.

In Jesus, God is now actively doing a new thing in the world –  
A new thing, an improbable thing. Dare I say, an odd thing.  
Something that doesn't fit in with our neat preconceptions  
Of what faith is and how it works;  
Or at least not of the part of keeping the faith that's determined by keeping the rules.

Here is grace – good wine flowing forth in superabundance:  
Yes, certainly prefiguring the mysteries of the eucharist – Jesus' gift to us –  
But also what that eucharist stands for:  
God's endless table of fellowship, meant for us, and for all.

There's a story I like by Garrison Keillor where at the end,  
Garrison's grandfather and Elvis Presley are in heaven,  
And if I remember right, they're playing checkers and drinking coffee,  
Having simple conversation with each other about how good the coffee is.  
I love that.

I love it because it expresses the essence of heaven to me.  
I pray most earnestly that Heaven, whatever else it may be,  
Won't consist of going to church too much.  
And I pray all the more that if it does,  
I can sit in *the pew*, and hear others' voices, and we can at least have pie afterwards.  
Your mileage on this may certainly vary.

But heaven, to me, is finally having the time to settle in and get to know you  
So that I can no longer grasp you by all the convenient labels and handles  
That I've set up for me to be able to deal with you.

Heaven, to me, is good food and drink in endless supply –  
Not for the sake of gluttony, not for *my* sake, but for the sake of *us*, of *all* of us.  
Heaven is an end to all the distractions and to all the excuses for not being joyous,  
Where we can laugh and talk and sing together, or just be quiet together,  
And maybe help put things right  
And give all the glory of it to the God who animates and loves everything.

It may come across as some kind of impertinent talk  
To describe heaven as an endless banquet  
On a morning when just 3,500 miles from here, there is massive devastation and loss of life.  
In Haiti today, more are waking up to the fact of death and destruction,  
To the sure knowledge that their lives will never be the same.  
More are failing to wake up; more are accounted among the dead.  
To us benumbed by always seeing violence and pain on TV,  
It's tempting to instead turn, and imagine our little heaven.  
It's difficult to see so much terrible and pointless and accidental bloodshed –  
Difficult ... to see heaven from the crumbling streets of Port au Prince.

Yet we are called, I think, to do just that.  
Not to be flippant or unrealistic,  
But to say, because of *that*, that we embrace *this*; we change *this*.  
Because of what is yet to be, we embrace What Is, and Who Is, and Who's Hurting,  
And try to amend What's Wrong.  
Because we want to feast together as sister and brother, as parents and children,  
As the dead to living,  
As the Whole of the Family of God gone before and yet to be ...  
Therefore, we intercede.  
Because you matter to me and I to you, I make intercession,  
And I pray for the day when we can sup together.  
I give to *you*; I pray for *you*; I sacrifice and sweat and endure pain *for you*;  
I wait by the window impatiently for you,  
And when I see you at last coming down the road,  
I run to greet you;  
And only then, when I look into your eyes, do I see that I greet myself;  
And only then, when I understand that we are one, will I truly understand Christ;  
And only then – and not a moment before – will we ever apprehend the joys of heaven.

That was similar to the dream, the vision, of Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
Who in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail wrote to anyone who would read it.

He wrote,

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.  
I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham.  
Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.  
We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.  
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.  
Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea.”

I wonder if we can hear this;

I wonder if we can be open to a heaven that’s as wide as Dr. King’s ... I just wonder.  
There is so much good wine, more than it is possible to ever consume.

Instead ... out of fear, out of restlessness, out of my own frame of reference,  
I am like that wedding guest who withholds his joy  
And attends to the keeping of his religious duties.

Yet I also find myself in private agreement with the steward,  
Who stood baffled, honestly,  
Scratching his head, and saying, *What a great mystery this is!*  
In the presence of sacred mystery there’s no other posture, no other attitude that counts  
Quite like wonder.  
*My Lord and my God! A taste of heaven!*

I can’t explain Pat Robertsons’ remarks this week in any other way that makes sense,  
Saying that Haiti is cursed because it made a deal with the devil.  
Brother Robertson must have run out of wonder;  
He must not be capable of seeing God at work in the midst of a huge natural disaster  
(Which is what it *was*).  
He calls himself a Christian, and I do not doubt his faith, but his heaven is far too narrow.  
The Book of Wisdom teaches that  
“The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,  
And no torment will ever touch them.  
In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died,  
And their departure was thought to be an affliction,  
And their going from us to be their destruction;  
But they are at peace.  
For though in the sight of men they were punished,  
Their hope is full of immortality....  
In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,  
And will run like sparks through the stubble.”<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if we can hear this;

I wonder if we can be open to a heaven as wide as the Bible’s ... I just wonder.  
There is so much good wine, more than it is possible to ever consume.

I’m speaking to you, Lillian Caroline Freese, you who are about to be baptised  
Into the Whole Family of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wisdom 3:1-4,7

Can you imagine, Lillian, looking into the starkest tragedy,  
Bringing with it fear and despair,  
Yet knowing at precisely the same time that in all of God's economy, nothing is cast away?  
Can you imagine how saving that would be?

I'm speaking to you, Mandy and Brandon, Lillian's parents,  
And to Jessica and Beau, her godparents,  
And to Pat, her grandmother,  
And to *all* who will make promises on Lillian's behalf today,  
And hold them for her, and shape her in them, until she is old enough to decide for herself.  
Can you who live in a world of sometimes unspeakable tragedy  
Dare to hear the words of Jesus spoken after he broke bread for thousands:  
"Gather up the crumbs left over, *that nothing may be lost.*"<sup>2</sup>

I'm speaking to you, this congregation, and I'm screaming it to myself,  
And to anyone with ears to hear the Gospel of Matthew:  
That even the very hairs of your head are numbered;  
Not to fear what kills the body but can't kill the soul.<sup>3</sup>  
That's certainly one of the first things we learn when we live a life in Christ,  
But it's not the first-in-sequence; it's the beginning;  
It's the opening taste of an unending feast.

It seems only right that after this baptism,  
We will pass a wide plate before one another,  
And ask what seems fit to give to the people of Haiti –  
God's chosen and blessed and beloved people, we and they.

Giving of ourselves into tragedy because we take our baptism so seriously  
Is like standing with the steward, scratching our heads.

How many cups' worth of wine there are!  
How open are the doors of heaven!  
How much are we loved!

So come, Lillian. Come into this mystery.  
Stand with us in awe and wonder;  
Take your place among the saints of earth;  
And do not withhold your gift.

---

<sup>2</sup> John 6:12

<sup>3</sup> Matt. 10:30 and 28, respectively