

Kingdom Signs

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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John 2:1-11

Imagine with me, the birthday party of a precocious ten year-old boy. We'll call him Tom. Tom, over summer break begs his mother for a birthday party. Tom wants to have a party but he also wants to have a treasure hunt as one of the fun things he'll offer his friends at the party. Mom agrees. And with his mom's help, Tom carefully plans and writes each one of the clues in cryptic rhyming couplets. He then worked out all the different things his friends would discover as they followed his clues. Tom worried a bit about how it would all go, knowing that some of his friends would be better at figuring out the clues than others. He worried some may get discouraged or bored and give up. But in the end, all went well and everyone had a great time at Tom's party.

The New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, begins his commentary on this passage with the personal experience I just shared. And he tells that story because he believes that the gospel of John is planned as sort of a treasure hunt, with careful and sometimes cryptic clues laid out for us to follow. The word John uses, however, is not "clue" but "sign." The apostle John, as he takes us through the life and story of Jesus reports about 8 signs in his gospel. And those signs teach us about the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus ushered into this world.

Our text tonight, Jesus' miracle at Cana, is the very first sign John records. So the big question for us tonight is, what does this sign reveal? What does Jesus' miracle have to say to you and me about the kingdom of God? Before we get to the story, I'll back up just a few verses because Jesus words to one of his brand new disciples, Nathaniel, sort of primes the pump for all the signs that are coming. What Jesus says to Nathaniel, as his new follower, is that he would see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Wow. What does that mean? Well even though it's a bit cryptic here's what we can take from that: Jesus is not your average Rabbi. Jesus is saying when you decide to follow him, it isn't going to be primarily an intellectual endeavor like it was for most rabbis and their disciples. Following Jesus is about much more than that. Following Jesus is about believing and expecting that there are moments when you will see heaven opened, and the transforming power of God's love break through into our present world. Jesus is preparing his followers to see the signs and to believe that the life and power of heaven, that the kingdom of God had invaded, and they would see it.

So, let's go back to the story. Jesus and his disciples arrive at the wedding celebration in Cana on the third day. You see, celebrating a wedding in Jesus' day was not at all like the several hour/single meal events that we are used to. These wedding festivities went on for an entire week. People arrived in droves and the feasting was nearly continual. In addition, for the Jewish people, a wedding celebration was also a deeply symbolic event. It was rooted in their history of having a covenant relationship with a God who described himself as their bridegroom. Wine in particular had a special place in the celebrations of God's people. So, on the third day when it was already gone, it wasn't just an inconvenience or a little embarrassing. It was a disaster. It was a shameful catastrophe, which compelled Jesus' mother to want to help. Notice that Jesus' mother was convinced, without hesitation, that her son could do something about this disaster. It makes me think that Mary already knew that whenever her son was on the scene, strange and heavenly things could happen.

Well, you know the rest of the story. Jesus instructs the servants to fill six large stone basins with water, draw some off, and bring some to the steward. As you know most hosts save the cheap wine for later when the palettes of the guests have been, shall we say, sufficiently dulled so as not to recognize the drop in quality. The steward assumes this host had bucked the tradition and saved the best wine for last, for suddenly this party had about 180 gallons of fantastic wine. Which says something to us about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' miracle at this wedding celebration first of all declares that Jesus has ushered in a kingdom of abundance.

When the prophets spoke of the coming day of salvation, one of the images they used to describe the coming joy was an abundance of wine. Amos pictured wine dripping from mountains and flowing from hills. Isaiah describes a time when wine and milk will be abundant and free. 180 gallons, roughly 2100 glasses of the finest vintage wine for an ordinary wedding in a Podunk village called Cana – a wedding where, just a few minutes before, folks must have looked in those empty jars and wondered – is that all there is? And Jesus' answer is a resounding “no.” It's a resounding, “there is more.” “There is an abundance.” “There is an enormous abundance of mercy and of grace for you.” “Yes, there is so much more!”

You see the water jars that Jesus filled with wine were there in the first place for the people to try to clean themselves up for the embrace of their bridegroom. They were there to wash away the regrets of life – the shortfalls, the failures, the missed opportunities, the things done and the things left undone. But of course, the water couldn't do that. It never could. But the water, whether the people knew it or not, had always pointed to something else – something that could wash away sin and regret and emptiness, once and for all – and that something is the rich wine of Jesus' blood. Like the wine Jesus produced for the dying party, his blood, and the forgiveness and freedom it offers, is the only way to fill our emptiness once and for all. It is the only way to the abundant joy for which God made us. And there is more than enough!

Here's the second thing we learn from this miracle about the nature of God's kingdom, it is quotidian. In other words, it is ordinary, common place, occurring every day. That's what quotidian means and that's the nature of God's kingdom among us. The signs of God's real presence with us are so often mediated to us in ordinary, everyday, small, common, objects and people and ways. The author and poet, Kathleen Norris, in her book “Quotidian Mysteries” points to a very ordinary experience she had that put her feet back on the path to God. She writes in her book about attending a catholic wedding and participating there in the Eucharist. There was much about that day that impressed her: the hospitality, the joy, the abundance of these non-Protestant folks. But what impacted Norris most about the day, what she found remarkable was that after the feast, the priest in all his robed formality picked up and cleaned up the plates and crumbs and goblets and drips of the meal he had just served. She was struck by the everydayness of it all. The everydayness of a meal, that folks share, and then gets cleaned up before you do it all again. She wrote, “After the experience of a liturgy that had left me feeling disoriented, eating and drinking were something I could understand. That and the housework.”

More often than not, it seems, we receive the message of God, we see the power of God in small things and in small ways. Ordinary bread and wine bear Christ's body and blood. An ordinary hug or a brief phone call can convey unbounded love and blessing. The smallest donation of food or money can tip the balance between scarcity and abundance. A simple act of kindness can make all the difference in the world.

Sometimes in an ordinary part of an ordinary day, heaven comes and breaks through. It happened to me recently – at an early morning meeting, no less. It was a meeting to talk about

something difficult. No one really wanted to be talking about what we were talking about. But something happened to me in that meeting. I looked around that table and it struck me that every person there had jobs and families that they managed in addition to their service to the church. Without exception the words that were spoken around that table so evidently came out of hearts that were committed to following Jesus, to demonstrating his love, and to trusting that even in difficult times and circumstances – God’s powerful love is with us and his kingdom is alive and at work among us. It was an everyday quotidian meeting and at the same time I realized our feet were on holy ground.

Finally, what Jesus’ sign at Cana tells us about the nature of God’s kingdom is that not only that it’s a kingdom of abundance and everydayness – it is also a cruciform kingdom. We’re at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry here. But it won’t be all that long before his earthly ministry comes to an end. When Jesus told his mother that his time had not yet come, he had in mind the time, the day, the moment, when his hour would come, the hour when he would give himself up for us, sacrificially pour himself out for our forgiveness, our salvation, for the kingdom of heaven is cruciform, cross-shaped. What’s so hopeful about this is that we as his followers, are given the courage and strength to live cross-shaped lives as well.

Years ago when my daughter was in eighth grade – and became the object of some real cruelty – she showed me something about cross-shaped living. I won’t share details but I’ll say that the incident rose to the level of my calling the mother of one of her friends to make her aware of what had happened (which I had never done before and never did after). She responded immediately by apologizing and asking if she could bring her daughter over the next day to apologize as well. I had all night to think about what I was going to say to this young girl. But when they arrived the next day and the young girl apologized, my daughter responded first. She said, “I understand. Hey, we’re in eighth grade. I too have said and done things I regret. Not one of us is perfect. I forgive you. And I’m sorry if I’ve said or done things that have hurt you too.” It is a good thing my daughter went first because what she said was way better than what I was going to say.

But then again – signs of the amazing, abundant, transforming, powerful love of God – are often seen in small, quotidian ways and in ordinary people. You may find the inbreaking of heaven this week in your work or in your school or in your family or in your home. Thank God for those signs – for John at the end of his gospel says that such heavenly sign are for our faith, that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in his name. Thanks be to God. Amen

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