

Epiphany 2 (C)

John 2:1-11

How many people still have their Christmas decorations up? Or at least a few of them? Sometimes, we like leaving our decorations up, and it's tough to take them down. Even here at the church, we still have the manger up on the front lawn...

We like our decorations because decorations are pretty. We like our decorations because they remind us of happy things, and they make us feel better, especially when things aren't so great. And sometimes, we like our decorations because they distract us from things we don't want to deal with at the moment (as you can do with a Christmas tree covering a section of the room that desperately needs to be painted!)

But we also know that decorations aren't really what any season is about. They don't change anything for us. And in the end, it wouldn't make a huge difference in our personal lives if we didn't have our decorations.

From the very beginning of John's Gospel, it seems that John understood that many people who heard and read about the miracles of Jesus considered them to be like decorations in the story of Jesus. Yes, they believed that these miracles all happened, but for many people who heard about them, they were things that happened in the lives of others which, like decorations were:

- A) neat tricks that made Jesus look good ... (indeed, many people who experienced them firsthand thought little more than this...)
- B) happy stories that made them feel better ... (and maybe simply made them hope that such a miracle might happen for them ...)
- C) stories about how great things could be ... (which simply helped them avoid dealing with how bad things were in their day to day lives ...)

But John understood that whenever Jesus did something miraculous, it was never intended to be a decoration. It wasn't something Jesus did to make himself look good. It wasn't something Jesus did just to make someone else feel better. Instead, Jesus always intended whatever he did to be a transforming event in the lives of both the people who experienced it and the people who heard about it.

And that's why John never calls any of the miraculous things Jesus did a "miracle". Instead, he calls them "signs." And today's Gospel story is what John calls the first of Jesus' signs.

And whenever we read about a sign, we're supposed to see in it the ways that Jesus transforms people around him to be more fully part of the kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing into the world. Indeed, the purpose of the sign is to help people see, experience and live more fully into God's reality.

That's what happens in today's story. This sign is all about transformation. At first glance, it seems that the major transformation is the transforming of water into wine. But what Jesus did wasn't a neat party trick. Instead, it had a transforming effect on the people who experienced it and who heard about it.

For the transforming of water into wine also transformed people. It transformed:

- A) a party that was over into a party that continued ... (and so it was a sign that God wasn't done with them ...)
- B) people who thought that their best days were behind them into people who could look forward to even better things in the future ... (the best wine came last – an ancient sign of the Messiah in the Old Testament...)
- C) the disciples from people who simply followed and watched into people who "believed" ... (the greatest transformation in this story isn't the water, but the beginning of the transformation of the disciples from mere students into people who trust Jesus ...)

The disciples came to understand that whatever Jesus did in their lives wasn't just a decoration. The disciples came to see what Jesus did as a sign of things to come. And the disciples came to trust that the blessings that God gave them in Jesus, even when it seemed miraculous, were signs that God would help and provide for them no matter what happened in life.

The blessings and the abundance that God provided through Jesus transformed the disciples. And even so, whenever we experience God's blessings and abundance in our lives, Jesus intends those experiences to transform us as well.

So how was it that the sign in today's Gospel transformed people? And how can such experiences transform us as well? Clearly, there were those at the wedding feast who were clueless about what was going on. And certainly, there were those who may not have felt at all affected by the works that Jesus did.

But for the disciples and a few others, transformation came about because they:

- A) recognized the abundance that was being provided ... (many people at the party just assumed there was plenty of wine; many others were simply worried about the lack of wine; the disciples and the servants, however, watched and saw what Jesus did – and they recognized that the wine wasn't just “good luck” but a blessing from God ...)
- B) shared the blessing that Jesus provided ... (nobody experienced this abundance until Jesus ordered them to draw some of the abundance out and take it to others; God's blessings can't be transformative unless they're shared. They can't simply be stored up; and especially at times when the people are worried about how little they have, the only way to be transformed by God's abundance is to share what God gives them – this is especially true of the feeding of the 5000...)
- C) appreciated the fact that the real blessing wasn't the wine, but the presence of Jesus ... (the disciples didn't believe in the miracle; they didn't believe that wine would always be there; instead, they trusted that Jesus would always be there for them, and they were confident that even if things were tough and difficult ahead – and even if God didn't provide a miracle at every turn – God would help them through everything that lay ahead ...)

And if these signs of Jesus are to be more than decorations in our lives, then we need to recognize that the abundance of God in Jesus didn't stop 2000 years ago. Instead, God's blessings continue to be poured out upon us, even in the difficult times in which we're living right now. And God's blessings to us aren't for decoration. They're meant to transform us into people who can more fully be God's people in the world, sharing already the coming kingdom of God.

And like those first disciples, Jesus is working to transform us whenever we:

- A) recognize the abundance that God has given us – that’s hard in our society, in which we all live in “relative depravity” and focus on what we don’t have; yet as we’ve reflected on the desperate situation in Haiti this week, it should be clear to us how much God has given us, even when we think times are tough for us ...
- B) share our abundance – it transforms us and it transforms the lives of others, just as it did in the story from today’s Gospel; it should be clear to most of us that sharing what to us is a small amount with folks in Haiti will have a huge and transformative impact on the lives of suffering people; and in fact, it’s in sharing our abundance that we can ourselves appreciate how much God is still at work in our world ...
- C) appreciate the fact that God’s presence through Jesus is the real thing we can rely upon; in the story, the disciples grew to be people who, whenever God provided didn’t say, “wow! We were lucky ; or wow, we just dodged the bullet that time!”, but instead they saw themselves as people God loved, and people who could trust God in the future;

Last month, because of God working through many people here at Prince of Peace, we were able to overcome a significant budget shortfall, and I want to thank everybody who helped! Our support of the significant ministries we’re doing here is itself a sign that we’re invested in doing what God has given us to do. But it should also be a sign, not that we won’t have money problems next year, but that God really will help us when we face big challenges. Just like those disciples, our challenges won’t ever end, but neither will God’s help and presence in Jesus.

Today, as we contemplate this first sign in John’s Gospel, Jesus invites us also to be transformed more fully into disciples who trust in him. And so today Jesus invites us also to grow each as people who recognize the abundance of God in our lives. Jesus invites us to grow each day as people who share the abundance God has given us with others. And Jesus invites us to grow each day as people who finally trust not in the quantity of our abundance but in our God who loves us and gives to us and who never forsakes us.

Amen.