

The Miracle of Joy

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This is Jesus' very first miracle.

The miracles that made Jesus famous were usually about helping someone who was suffering.

Healing a man with leprosy. Restoring life to the child of a grieving mother. Multiplying bread for a hungry crowd.

These miracles are why the crowds pressed in around him, why hundreds came from miles away to be near to him.

Jesus was born into a suffering world and he seemed to push himself to the brink of exhaustion again and again to heal hurt, repair brokenness, and end suffering.

So much of the story of Christ is about confronting the powers of the world, facing the worst that the Roman Empire had to offer, and facing an ever growing wave of desperate human need.

But his first miracle, his very first miracle, happened at a wedding reception.

The crisis here is not existential. It is not a real emergency in any sense of the word.

Although it does feel like a crisis to the people at the party.

They are out of wine.

Jesus' mother sees in her son a possible solution, and after everything she did to bring him into the world, I'd say its the least he can do to help out in this socially awkward predicament.

So after a little back and forth with Mary, Jesus calls for several big vats to be filled with water, and when the stewards dips into the vat, it has become wine.

But not only that.

It's the good stuff.

Everyone is very impressed that even late into the evening, when the probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference anyway, the hosts are still serving from the top shelf.

That is Jesus' very first miracle.

Jesus first miracle is to keep a party from winding down prematurely. It is to keep the good times rolling.

Jesus first miracle is not to take something bad and make it good.

It is to take something good, and make it even better.

A lot of biblical interpreters and preachers have spilled a lot of ink and piled up a lot of words about the deeper metaphorical meaning, the way that the wine represents Christ's blood, or the purification vats have some meaning or another that Jesus is turning on its head. But I think they are mostly trying to avoid the inescapable simplicity of what happens in this miracle.

The hosts ran out of wine, and Jesus made more.

Now I want to acknowledge that for some people, free-flowing wine is hardly a miracle. I am thinking especially of those who live with addiction, or love someone whose addiction has been a source of hurt and harm.

It is not a perfect metaphor to be sure, but I think it is pretty clear that what Jesus is trying to show us with this wine is a sign of celebration and joy.

Jesus is showing us that he did not only come to bring hope to the hopeless, he came to be the life of the party.

There is a scene in a crass-comedy called “Talledaga Nights” where several characters, all NASCAR drivers, are arguing about how they prefer to imagine Jesus.

Ricky Bobby professes his strong preference for the Christmas Jesus, the little baby in the manger.

His older father reminds Ricky that Jesus was also a grown man.

Then John C. Rielly’s character says something accidentally profound, he says: “I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo t-shirt because it says, I want to be formal, but I am here to party.”

I don’t think the writers of that movie had done a close study of the Gospel of John, but that line is onto something.

Jesus had the single most serious purpose of any human who ever lived. To bridge the gap between heaven and earth and bring humanity closer to God.

And yet even he didn't miss a chance for celebration and joy.

As much as he came to turn what was bad good, he came to make what was already good even better.

Perhaps you have heard the old expression "there are no atheists in foxholes." It gets at the truth that in moments of crisis, and fear, and hopelessness, our hearts are more naturally inclined to reach toward God.

We wrestle in our hearts with the question of why bad things happen, but we never really seem to wonder too much about why good things happen.

Most of us fill our prayers with petitions about the worst things in our lives. And that is appropriate, we should certainly lift up to God our broken hearts and bruised spirits.

But what about inviting God to our parties?

How often do we remember to turn our hearts toward God in the moments of greatest joy. The moments when the world feels right.

It can be a miracle just to celebrate the goodness and joy that still fills our world, and our lives, despite the pain, despite the fear, despite the despair.

I led a very devoted bible study group at the last church I served, these folks had been meeting every Thursday night for a decade to study scripture together. I helped guide the group during my 2 year tenure at the church, although they didn't need much from me.

When I was getting ready to move on, to come here, the bible study group invited me over to one of their houses for a farewell dinner.

We enjoyed a glass of wine and the customary dinner party small talk.

The Red Sox score, the weather, summer travel plans.

And then time came to sit down to dinner.

The hosts directed me toward my seat, which happened to be in front of a basket of bread on the table.

Once we were all seated, one of our hosts said: “instead of asking you to say grace, we thought you might lead us in a service of communion.”

Here was some bread, and some wine, and friends gathered around a table.

So we did. I lifted the basket of bread and passed it, I refilled my wine glass and invited others to do the same.

I recalled Christ, and that meal thousands of years ago that we remember still.

And we ate and drank.

And something funny happened after that. The conversation shifted. The small talk fell to the side.

Someone started by telling a story of one member of the group who had died that year. And then those stories started flowing, and we laughed, and remembered this beloved one with joy.

Somehow that got us talking about other loved ones from our own lives and our community past. The impact they had on us. What we learned from them. The best story we knew about their life.

Then we moved to expressing our appreciation and love for one another. It was beautiful to be a part of.

I can't trace the whole conversation, but it flowed and moved. It touched deeper and deeper places in our hearts. We moved between reverence and laughter effortlessly. We lost track of the time. We lost track of the world beyond that table beyond that moment.

I remember that when they asked me to serve communion at first it felt kind of odd to me. I was worried that this ritual remembering Christ on the hardest night of his life might dampen the mood.

I admit that I didn't naturally think that what this already festive party needed was a little more Jesus.

But that is just what we needed.

Not Christ to turn something that was bad good, but to take something good, and make it much, much better.

We often remember Martin Luther King Jr. for his serious speeches. For his bold and stoic confrontation of racism. For his soaring oratory and steadfast marches.

As well we should.

But one of my favorite lesser known videos of MLK comes from an appearance on the tonight show.

Its classic late night fodder. He is telling the story of his flight out.

He says: "I flew out of Washington this afternoon and as soon as we started out they notified us that the plane had mechanical difficulties, so when we finally landed I was pretty happy. I always happy to land after mechanical difficulties.

Now I don't want to give you the impression that as a baptism preacher I don't have faith in God in the air, it's just that I've had more experience with him on the ground."

It may not seem like much more than a good line, but consider that it was delivered on Feb 8, 1964.

Just a few weeks after he launched the Poor People's campaign, and just a few weeks before he would march with striking sanitation workers in Memphis.

And, although no one could have known this at the time, it was exactly 2 months before his funeral service would be held in Atlanta.

Think about everything that must have been going on in his head, and in his heart.

And suddenly that joke is a minor miracle.

A miracle of joy. Tenacious and insistent.

Proclaiming, like a beacon in the night that with God there is always a reason to celebrate.