



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

1309 R Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 (402)474-1979 www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Mark's on the Campus
January 14, 2007

I GUESS I NEED TO TAKE BACK at least part of something I implied last week. This gospel reading clearly portrays Jesus as keeping the party going when otherwise it might have fizzled out—so I guess maybe he was an Episcopalian after all!

But of course Jesus changing water into wine has motives that might be purer than your average Episcopalian in a similar situation. Jesus isn't simply keeping the party going. He's manifesting the presence of God in the midst of it.

One of the wonderful things about this story is that it takes place in the context of an everyday celebration, even if it's an extraordinary day. A couple has married. The family has saved for the celebration afterwards and they're having a wonderful time. But somehow they didn't—or perhaps weren't able to—put up enough wine for the party.

Now I don't think John's intention is to portray some *Animal House* scene in which everyone finds themselves falling all over each other and Jesus just adds to what would have been viewed as a problem then and would be today as well. But I do think that John wants us to understand that God is present in the midst of the ordinary, in the everyday, and in the midst of the great celebrations of our lives, often in quite simple ways.

Think about some of the times when the presence of God has been most evident to you. Some of those times might have been quite extraordinary, dramatic moments,

great epiphanies. Others might very well have been quite ordinary, simple moments. Times of hiking in the woods; maybe in the sandhills. The first time you held your newborn child and recognized the miracle of a life that you helped to create, and yet—at the same time—that was created very independent of you. That moment when your teenager forgave you, and you knew how much you needed it. Those times when you've been listening to music that carries your soul to some transcendent place—and you realize that you've been renewed through the experience.

Times when we realize just how present God is in *all* times, carrying us forward in ways we don't usually recognize.

In spending time with the gospel this week, I found myself especially taken with those empty stone jars that Jesus ends up using to the glory of God. The jars are for ritual washing, so they're already present as a reminder of God in everyday life.

When they're introduced into the story, they're empty. Jesus takes those empty jars and uses them to manifest God's presence. He's able to do so because, as Mary has requested, the people at the party are listening for what Jesus says and following his instructions—and his disciples are paying attention.

Yes, this is a miracle story. But it's a miracle story different from someone being healed of a horrible disease. The results in the wine aren't that dramatic. Yes, it does taste wonderful, as we might expect! But that's not likely to alter the course of anyone's life! What is most life-changing is probably what we're told at the end of the story: that this changing of water into wine contributes to Jesus' disciples believing in him.

As is true for all of us who follow Jesus, his simple, everyday presence among us can touch our lives in ways that deepen our faith in Him. Those little moments can help

us continue our feasting here in the community of faith even when life is at its roughest: when we fail the test we thought we had nailed or when we find ourselves at odds with someone we care about or when the multitude of little—or not so little—challenges add up to a huge mountain before us. It's all too easy for us to attribute the results of Jesus' presence with us to something else, to some other force, just as the steward attributes this especially good wine to the bridegroom's generosity, when really it's about God right there with him. It's all too easy to attribute what is of God to something else because God just doesn't usually make a big splash. The power and presence of God hangs out with us so much that it's easy for us to miss it much of the time. Until we find ourselves empty and dry, feeling a bit like those stone jars in our gospel this morning. Then we're more likely to wonder where we can find God. Fortunately, we don't have far to look.

Over the years I've spoken to a number of people who feel guilty about having neglected God for a time, and then when they find themselves empty or in need, turning to God once again. In fact I myself vividly remember weeping in a pastor's office one time about a similar reality in my own life: I had been away from God for years and then, after returning, felt horrible about having denied Jesus for all those years. I intimately knew Peter's weeping after he denies Jesus those three times.

I have no idea what that pastor said to me that day, but what I've come to understand in my soul over the years is that God just wants us back. God doesn't care about our time away; it's a thing of the past, it's over. Maybe *I* needed to grieve and weep about that time, but *God* didn't really need me to.

God simply welcomes us and delights in us *whenever* we turn. Just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God rejoices and throws a party—and prepares for us a

drink superior to any other. The mistake we too often make is that we judge ourselves and one another far more harshly than God judges us. Too often, we judge without joy at our presence and without mercy toward ourselves and others; God judges *only* with joy at our presence and only with boundless mercy.

God always waits to fill us to the brim with food and drink that tastes more delightful than we can ever anticipate. No one else, nothing else, can fill the deepest emptiness within us; that's the way we're made, thank God. Everything else that we try to pour into those empty spaces pales by comparison with what God offers us.

So come to the altar this morning, eating and drinking and rejoicing. Give thanks for all that God offers you in this simple meal of bread and wine. Gifts of God for the people of God.

What else do we *really* need?