

Puzzlements at Cana

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Several weeks ago, I was at Riverside Church for a special event – the last official sermon by their senior minister, the Rev James Forbes, before his official retirement. Now, Rev Forbes didn't sound like a man ready to sail away into tropical seclusion, and many of us suspect that this in fact won't be his last sermon, at Riverside or anywhere else, and we certainly hope not. Jim Forbes has been a shining voice for progressive causes, very much in the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr, whom we are celebrating tomorrow, and Jim Forbes, like Dr King, has lots of things to say. And some Sunday mornings in particular, he says them at some length. In fact, on that recent Sunday morning he commented on this, reporting that a good sermon should be no longer than 18 minutes. His ran over. I hope mine won't.

It's well worth trying – however fruitlessly -- to be brief and to the point, because much of the time, the most important things can't be actually *said* anyway, so one might as well be brief. Try as we might, much in life escapes our neat and cozy verbal categories. Our own inner lives, as Freud and so many others have pointed out, are not directly accessible much of the time, even to us -- our inner lives cannot be so well *said* - - and so we have dreams, and we have stories, and we have songs that that try to reveal to

us the most intimate inner seat of our own lives. What has been called our “souls.”
When illuminated for us, Scripture does this as, just as our gospel passage does today.

This story today is the first miracle story in the Gospel of John, and occurs nowhere else in Scripture. Its significance is clear enough: it’s intended to introduce Jesus’ ministry to us, for the first time in this gospel. For up until now all we are told about the man Jesus is that total strangers (simple fishermen) will follow him -- falling for him hook, line and sinker. At first, anyway. But human nature being what it is, you can bet that not even such an impressive teller of parables as Jesus would attract such a devoted coterie of followers as the disciples unless he had something better than just good late-night entertainment to offer. And this is where the wedding at Cana comes in, because it shows us the miraculous ministry that Jesus brings.

Or, rather, this seems to be the intention of the passage. But look a little closer, I think we find a number of puzzling aspects. There is Mary’s strange place in the story. What’s she doing there, all of a sudden? (Would you take YOUR mother to a wedding where everybody was dying to get soused?) “They have no wine,” she announces. Is she worried that the guests won’t be able to get soused? Does she really expect Jesus to do something about this? And Jesus’ response to her may strike us as just plain rude. “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His hour? What’s that supposed to be about?

And then notice this.... A miracle is about to take place – always a challenge for liberals or progressive Christians -- but even here the gospel writer doesn't seem to be getting the bang for his literary buck that we might expect. Here we see not an amazed public impressed by Jesus's metaphysical virtuosity – turning water into wine is something of a startling feat, after all, and elsewhere in Scripture, at such moments we hear of a very different impact among the onlookers. This is not like Matthew, for example, when a rather large crowd “was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel...” -- in Matthew, but not here. Here, some of the key players aren't even aware that much has happened. The chief steward thinks it's the bridegroom's doing (“you've hidden the best wine until the last moment, haven't you?” – the steward says to the groom). But of course it wasn't the groom who did this -- it's Jesus, -- and the steward misses this entirely. In fact, there's no indication that anyone beyond the disciples knew that anything unusual had happened at all. (The rest of the crowd were just ready get soused.) The disciples are the ones who saw, and (as we are told in the last verse) were drawn to believe in him. So, yes, Jesus *could* obviously do more than just tell a good parable, and so his ministry begins – but it begins in an odd way, through a miracle strangely performed out of view, and accompanied by misunderstanding and puzzlement.

So what's going on here? Have we missed something? Well, maybe not. What I found myself wondering, as I puzzled over the text this week – and I invite everyone to ask this of him or herself -- is whether our own puzzlement, brought about by the text

itself, just might be part of what the text is *about*, and whether that might say something about who we are in relation to God.

So let me try to unpack this a bit. I want to make three points on this. (1) Scripture is about us. (2) We are not just any listening audience. (3) Despite what we might think, we are in a position of great advantage when it comes to listening to God's Word.

(1) First of all, here we have more than just some ancient yarn about Jesus the purveyor of party liquor. It's not just about a wedding in Galilee either. Somehow or other, it's about something else. *It's about us* – each and every one of us. Scripture calls for us to listen and assess our selves, to reconsider the direction our lives are taking, and, where needed, to heed the words of the John the Baptist to turn in a new direction (what we traditionally call “repentance”). If we don't hear this – as more than simply the plot of what was read to us in last week's lesson – if we don't hear this as applying to our own lives, then we're not going to get the message. That, I think, the first thing to notice. – Scripture does not just require our listening: it's actually about our listening.

People typically don't listen very well, do we? Sometimes we don't even hear what's being said at all. We let our prior expectations govern our responses. There's an old story about President Franklin Roosevelt – which may be apocryphal (I don't know) - - who often complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said in the White House. One day, during one of those interminable White House receiving lines, he

decided to try something. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he announced quietly,

"I murdered my grandmother this evening."

And how did the guests respond? With exclamations like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It wasn't till late in the event that FDR found someone who'd actually heard him. The ambassador from Bolivia did, and without missing a beat, His Excellency leaned over and whispered back, "I'm sure she had it coming."

(2) So how do we listen to this news:

Jesus turned water to wine this evening?

How we listen will determine what we hear. And there's a special way of listening to these stories, isn't there? That's the second thing to notice -- that this Scripture is not written for just any old listener. If we hear it right, and if it's indeed about us (my first point), then we are not just any old listening audience. Gospels are specially crafted for disciples, for those who see through the eyes of faith -- like the original Twelve here, who by the day's end are drawn to believe in the power of Jesus because something unexpectedly blessed has happened in the very course of their daily lives. The question is, are we taking notice?

(3) Well, we might say, if we actually saw water turned to wine, or the lame made to walk, or a sealed tomb opened and a resurrection occur – yes, we’d notice that, wouldn’t we? But we aren’t there to see it, are we? This brings us to the third point to keep in mind here. Perhaps surprisingly, we are in a privileged position that those original Twelve did not share. Yes we are. This might seem an odd thing to say. No, we don’t actually sit at the Master’s feet. We can’t attest to what a real eye-witness might have seen coming out of those water jugs (just as we can’t accompany the women to the tomb on Easter morning). But even at this very early moment in the Johannine story, we already know what’s ahead: we know about Passover, and Gethsemane and the Cross. And we know about the Resurrection – whatever we take that to mean. And because we know the outcome, we have a much better sense of what’s at stake at these early moments in Jesus’ ministry. And as we hear these stories over and over again in the course our faith journey, perhaps we begin to clear some space to do more than just try to figure out the puzzling plot. Perhaps **we can begin to pay attention to our own reactions to the story, in the light of what we know is to come.**

So. Fine. Does all this make Mary’s strange reaction to Jesus, or the odd secretiveness of the miracle any more understandable? I don’t think so. Do we need more study perhaps, more exegetical commentary, more analysis of Greek syntax? I doubt it. Could it be instead that at least some of the puzzlement is intentional and necessary? Could it be instead that the very point is precisely not to explain everything

away –not to shrink wrap the gospel into the bundle of expectations we already have about it? If Scripture is about us, maybe the lingering puzzles in Scripture are about us as well.

For it turns out of course that much about our lives is impenetrably puzzling. For those of us who, like myself, strongly prefer to have everything all wrapped up and laid out in advance, this does not seem like good news. And my friends tell me that I really should take this to heart. For example -- since we've just come out of the holidays, I'm still reminded of how during Christmases past, I used to spend a great deal of time wondering where on earth I'm going to get more of those matching tree ornaments for the holiday season? Do I have enough for next year? Can I get some on sale this week perhaps? I know it's silly, but I've actually worried about this rather intensely at times. And when I'm more sober-minded about it, I have to smile as I recall the temptation to imagine God and His angels greatly concerned about this as well. I once met a lovely lady at a New Age gathering who reported to me that God on more than one occasion has directed her to a miraculously convenient parking space, right in front of the very shop she's looking for. Well, I don't know for sure if that really happens. I know what Matthew says about God's eye being on the sparrow, but frankly I think it's pushing things just a bit to think that God's has an eye for the lavender and teal tree ornaments which I'm not certain I can find on my own..

So some uncertainties are just not spiritually interesting. But.....there are other kinds of uncertainties in life, aren't there? Some of life, after all, is not at all like looking

for tree ornaments—it can be more like wondering if there is any reason to celebrate Christmas in the first place. Many of us in this community are (shall we say) puzzled about where our next square meal is coming from, how the rent is going to be paid, how our career is going to be salvaged, or how our mother or father or son or sister is going to make it through cancer surgery we can't really pay for. That's real puzzlement! And if that's ever been any of us, then maybe we hear the miracle stories like the wedding at Cana with a rather different level of concern. And a different intensity of hope, perhaps. At those moments, the Scripture really does speak to us, we really are involved, as we grasp at any straw of hope we can muster.

And that, I think, is why there are puzzling aspects written right into some of these Scriptural passages. Though we know what's ahead for Jesus three years or so down the road in the gospel of John, we don't really know what's ahead in our own future. I suspect that most of us would rather have it all planned out. Who wouldn't? And what does that say about us? Could it possibly be that somewhere down deep inside, in that innermost part of our tender souls, we think we need to know what's ahead so we can control it ourselves? I suspect so, as I look inside myself, and I suspect that this may say something about my relation to God and my ability to trust in a power greater than myself..

Life isn't a tidy game plan, any more than the Cana story is a tidy academic exercise. And Scripture is about our lives. The gospel is about challenging many of our settled life-expectations, our so-called "sensible" beliefs, what we think we always already know, what we think we have to know if we are to control our own destiny. Dr

King, in his famous letter from the Birmingham jail, was responding to just this kind of sensible beliefs, among fellow clergymen who thought they already knew what kinds of social actions were “untimely and unwise.” Demonstrations, they thought – even meticulously planned non-violent demonstrations -- incite hatred and violence. And that can’t be a good thing, can it? We know that. We can pretty well predict what will happen when hatred and violence get incited, can’t we? We know that. No progress can come by pushing people too far outside their comfort zone, can it? We know that.

Or do we? And what can or wormy uncertainties and puzzlements does that open up?

So, yes, life is uncertain. But is that all we can say? Are we left twisting slowly in the winds of that uncertainty – or on the cross, as it were? That’s not the message. The other part of the gospel message is that we do not need to be suspended in those uncertainties. For look at this passage. Despite all the puzzling narrative disruptions in the plot, Jesus’ words have an absolutely clarifying effect on Mary. Instead of being offended by what seems an off-putting, puzzling remark from her son, she immediately says to the servants, in effect, “Ok, do whatever he says.” He’s going to fix things, in other words. And of course he does.

So, in closing, what kind of nourishment can we draw from those wedding jugs at Cana? When we are in despair about our jobs, our living situation, our health, our family problems or our vacant social life, when we doubt that life is as abundant for us as we think it is for people around us, when we are in a funk about who we are and where we’re going, when we’re worried perhaps, especially this week coming up, about having

even seen the promised land but not being able to get there ourselves, in *this* life anyway -- perhaps then we'll remember Cana, where Mary the mother of Jesus, worried about the provisions for the feast, understands in a twinkling. "Ok," she says, "just do whatever Jesus tells you." Perhaps there are moments in life when we just have to give it over and do whatever he says – however we happen to hear that higher power, which transcends our own egotistic need to control events, and regardless of what we think we already know about our own future. Any truly abundant future, after all, belongs not to us alone, but to God, who is our strength and our redeemer. Amen.