

Sunday January 16, 2022
First Sunday of Ordinary Time
Parishioner Reflection

By: Mary Bastedo

According to St. John's Gospel, the first thing Jesus does, after calling his disciples, is bring them to a wedding feast. There they witness what John calls "the first sign." Jesus reveals his glory and the disciples believe in him. What is this "first sign"? What does it signify? Jesus is introducing his disciples to what it means to follow him; he is giving them a taste of the Kingdom of Heaven. This sign is like an overture at the beginning of an opera - it anticipates the unfolding of the whole story, it offers a taste of the fulfillment that awaits its conclusion.

A sign operates on many levels. First of all, the wedding feast itself is a sign. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus describes what the Kingdom of Heaven is like by telling a parable: "The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." (Mt. 22:2) In John's Gospel, Jesus actually brings his disciples to a wedding feast, inviting them to experience something together. They are invited to a celebration of love, which involves music, dancing, singing, feasting and drinking, bringing together friends and family, possibly for a whole week. Jesus is inviting them to experience what Pope Francis calls "the joy of the Gospel."

At the wedding feast a miracle of transformation occurs. Mary, who is very present, attentive to the needs of the young couple, notices that the wine has run out. "They have no wine," she quietly indicates to Jesus. Jesus dismisses her concern, yet Mary has confidence in him. "Do whatever he tells you," she says to the servants. Then the miracle happens; the servants fill six huge stone jars with water and when the steward tastes the water he realizes it has become a rich delicious wine. This miracle of transformation is a sign of how our ordinary lives, symbolized by the water, will be transformed into vital, creative lives, infused with the energy of divine love, symbolized by the rich, delicious wine which flows in extravagant abundance. This transformation can happen in our journey of faith even from day to day. It is a transformation from isolation to communion with God and others; from sadness to joy, from discouragement to hope.

This Christmas, my plans to celebrate with my brother and his family had to be cancelled due to last-minute COVID regulations. At first I felt sad and disappointed. Then I called a friend to see what she was doing; her plans had also been cancelled. So I invited her for Christmas Eve dinner at my house. She was so happy to come, along with three other friends. It gave me great joy to clean the house, plan the menu, shop, cook and set the table. It was the first dinner party I had given since the beginning of the pandemic. Each of us would have been lonely had we stayed

home. Instead we all experienced a wonderful joy and communion in being together around the Christmas tree, enjoying a beautiful meal together. It was a taste of the Kingdom; a transformation of our hearts.

The sign of transformation from water into wine also symbolizes how the beauty of human love, celebrated at the wedding feast, is transformed into an even more beautiful reality in the Kingdom of God. Marriage becomes a sacrament; God is present in the covenant of love between the bride and the bridegroom.

The image of the wedding feast also points to the intimate, loving relationship God desires to have with his people, both as community and as individuals. Isaiah prophesies about this reality; God's people will be called by a new name and become a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord. They will be transformed; no more will they be called "Forsaken" or "Desolate" but in this new covenant relationship with the Lord they will be called "my Delight." "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." (Is. 62:5)

Christ is identified as the bridegroom in John's Gospel. John the Baptist refers to himself as the friend of the bridegroom. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom, yet the bridegroom's friend who stands and listens to him is filled with joy at the bridegroom's voice." (Jn. 3:29) In Mark's Gospel Jesus says, "Surely the bridegroom's attendants cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them." (Mark 2:19) The Book of Revelation describes Christ as the Lamb of God and says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." (Rev. 19:7)

Consecrated celibate life is a sign of that very personal love of Christ, the bridegroom. "From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, to be intent on the things of the Lord, to seek to please him, and to go out to meet the Bridegroom who is coming. Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model." (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1618)

Let us ponder the multi-layered meaning and promise of this "first sign" of Jesus, this miracle of transformation, that was given at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. How does God want to transform the water of my life into the wine of the Kingdom and make me a living witness to His glory, that all might believe?