



The Joy of Jesus

January 16, 2022: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard: in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

Perhaps some of you have seen the bumper sticker “Don’t postpone joy.” It’s been around for quite some time. Our Gospel this morning has that bumper sticker all over it. More on that in a moment.

The Wedding at Cana is one of the best stories about Jesus in the Gospels, I think. It’s unique to John, and it’s full of rich imagery, family tension, and of course, a miracle, which John’s Gospel refers to as a “sign.” Seven is a good round, holy number, so John chose seven to highlight, out of the many he could have chosen. The other signs are: Jesus heals the son of a Roman official; Jesus heals a man who has been lame for many years; Jesus feeds the 5,000; Jesus walks on water; Jesus heals the man born blind; Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead.

What is a sign? It is more than just another name for a miracle. It points to some essential aspect of Jesus’ ministry—healing, feeding, encouraging, challenging, bringing life out of death. A sign is meant to point the way to trust in the person, ministry, and power of Jesus. It also highlights some aspect of what the Body of Christ, the Church, we, should be up to as well.

Why a wedding? Beyond bringing two people together who promise to spend the rest of their lives together, in the ancient world a wedding more importantly also brought together two families. It was a joyous party that lasted for days, as many as 7 days or more. The wedding contained the promise of joining, of reconciling, of delight, and security, and blessing. We see that in Scripture, especially this morning in the Prophet Isaiah, weddings are rich symbols for God’s faithful, covenantal love with Israel, and with us.

Why a sign featuring wine? Wine has rich associations with joy in Scripture. The Psalmist says to God, “You have filled my heart with more joy than when grain and new wine abound.” (Psalm 4.7) Jewish tradition held that an especially lavish outpouring of wine was connected with the Coming of the Messiah.

Why wine at a wedding as the first sign? Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “(15.11) Perhaps Jesus meant joy to be at the center of the Christian life, and maybe even, and especially when, least expected. Recall the steward says to the bridegroom, “You’ve kept the good stuff until now.” Joy is the central to the Epiphany of who Jesus is.



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Some time ago, I listened to a podcast of Father James Martin being interviewed by Krista Tippett, on a public radio program called On Being. Fr. Martin is a Roman Catholic, a Jesuit who has written a variety of well-regarded and popular books, including *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*. I haven't read that book, but in the conversation with Tippett, Father Martin expounded on the centrality of joy in authentic Christian spirituality, and how the Western Church, in particular, has really missed this.

Talking about his own Roman Catholic Tradition, Martin remarks that so often when you go into a church, the first thing you see is Jesus on the Cross. And the takeaway might be that the most important thing about Jesus' life was his sorrow and death. Martin says, "You know, most of his life was, needless to say, not on the Cross, and not about suffering. And so, he's the man of joys, too. And you see statues of the saints, and they all look ticked off. You know, they all look like they're mad about something. Or they smelled a piece of bad cheese." <https://onbeing.org/programs/james-martin-finding-god-in-all-things/>

There is no room for anti-Catholicism here. It should be obvious that a variety of Christian traditions and Christian people, not just Roman Catholics, fall into the trap of failing to imagine that joy was central to Jesus' life. Maybe even us.

The presence of joy is a sign of spiritual maturity. Think of the Dalai Lama, or Archbishop Desmond Tutu, may he rest in peace. Or think of some of the most spiritual people you know. There's a very good chance that person has an excellent sense of humor, especially about him or herself, even, or especially, in the face of difficult circumstances.

Fr. Martin talks about the Jesuit tradition of using imagination as we contemplate Scripture. We use our imagination to place ourselves within a Scripture scene and see what comes up, by way of emotions or feelings or desires or sensations. And then we pray with what we experience.

Imagine Jesus at this wedding. Is he a friend of the family? He wasn't from Cana, so where was he staying? His mom was there. Imagine the tone of voice, the facial expression in the interaction between Jesus and his mother. Did he have other family there? Did he once play with the groom when they were kids? Imagine Jesus with a glass of wine, or several? What kinds of food were his favorites? Imagine Jesus dancing. Who would he have been dancing with? Would we want to dance with him? How do we feel about seeing him dance or have a glass of wine or maybe feeling lonesome that he's not the one getting married? Imagine Jesus running into old friends or giving a toast. Imagine the singing. Imagine Jesus smiling and laughing. How does that make you feel?

I have a picture of Jesus, laughing, that I keep in one of the places where I pray. He's throwing his head back, his eyes nearly closed, like he's having a really good laugh, like he's really enjoying himself. Maybe the sign we need to pray for in our lives is for joy like Jesus' joy, especially, at a time when it may feel,



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with good reason, that the goal posts of joy keep receding just beyond our reach. Joy that comes when we least expect it. Joy that comes from trust that we are God's beloved. Joy that comes from not being afraid. Joy that comes from knowing that we matter. Joy that comes from knowing that we don't have to pretend to be something that we're not. Joy that comes from knowing we are capable of bringing joy to others. Joy that comes from being invited to the banquet that God has prepared for all of us.

And when we pray for and experience that joy, then that bumper sticker becomes a sign that points the way to Jesus.

Amen.