

JESUS' FIRST MIRACLE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, January 17, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to John, 2: 1 – 11.

et lui dit: Tout homme sert d'abord le bon vin, puis le moins bon après qu'on s'est enivré; toi, tu as gardé le bon vin jusqu'à présent. Tel fut, à Cana en Galilée, le premier des miracles que fit Jésus. Il manifesta sa gloire, et ses disciples crurent en lui.

— Jean 2: 10 – 11

Seventeen years ago in New Haven, living in the house we lived in on Ogden Street, I became acquainted with a man who was a member of the church we attended. At the age of eighty-seven Mr. Brooks couldn't get out much, so whenever Victoria and Gabriel made cookies, they sent me across the street to Mr. Brooks bearing a dozen. That became a regular if informal part of my education at Yale. I'd knock on his door. A nurse would open it. I'd pour some milk and this southern gentleman and I would enjoy what he called "good talk."

Cleanth Brooks loved stories. He told me more than a few, about his life as a teacher of literature, about his beloved wife Tinkum, about his friends. For example, in the year 1929 – 1930, when he and Robert Penn Warren were in Oxford as Rhodes scholars, they kept their feet to the fire of the American South. On many nights in their rooms amid the dreaming spires of Oxford, 'Red' would have Cleanth sing a song that began with this quatrain:

Frankie and Johnny were lovers,
Lordy how they could love
They swore to be true to each other
True as the stars above.

That American folksong appears with John Donne's *Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, Milton's *The Blindness of Samson*, T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock* and other poems in the classic they wrote together, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students*. Luminaries in the academy of letters that they would become, they never let the academy dumb them down.

When Cleanth Brooks died I assisted at his Burial Office; several days later there was a knock at the door. It was Carver Blanchard, Tinkum's nephew but more of a son to the Brooks'. Carver said, "My uncle wanted you to have this," and he handed me a bottle of wine, a 1981 Château Petrus Pomerol. "He wanted me to give you this

and a word," he said. "The word is 'Praise.'" I'll come back to this later.

This morning's story of the water turned into wine is one of the three narratives characteristic of Epiphany, the season devoted in the Christian kalendar to the manifest glory of Jesus. "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory."

It may have been only three days before that he was wading through the mud and the tall grass on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. All we are given to know about the bride and the groom is that they wanted Jesus and his mother at their wedding. John vouchsafes to tell us nothing more about them, except what happened when the wine ran out. The teetotalers among you, with the gentlemen who prefer bourbon and the ladies who like their beer, might think, So what? But that would fail to appreciate what wine means to the Jewish and Christian imagination. The first thing Noah did when he got off the Ark was — what? He planted a vineyard. Jesus commanded his disciples to drink wine poured out in remembrance of him.

Jesus is at a party standing near his mother when she says to him, "They have no wine." Consider Mary. She never had a fairy-tale wedding. Why? Because she is *his* mother, above all mortal examples the very picture of what discipleship looks like and sounds like. "Be it done unto me according to thy word," she had said to the Archangel Gabriel, our Lady bearing not just in mind but in her flesh the Dayspring from on High.

"They have no wine," she says to him. In New York City she'd be called a 'noodge'. And Jesus replies with strange words. "Woman — *γυνή* he always calls her, not *μητέρα*, except at the very end when he speaks to her from the cross — what has that to do with me? My hour has not yet come." Now's not the time. Jesus is never in a hurry in the gospels. Have you noticed that? He receives word

that his friend Lazarus is dying and he does not hop the first train back to Bethany and Lazarus dies. Jesus is on time. It's just not our time he's on but the Father's. We forget that. He never does.

Mary knows a thing or two about being on time with the Most High. She doesn't point that out to him, and she doesn't respond to him directly. Instead, she says something loud enough for Jesus to overhear. Speaking to the servants, she says, "Do whatever he tells you." It is an echo. It echoes something he had heard three days before at the Jordan, when the heavens opened and a voice said, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him!" *Do whatever he tells you.* That expression of trust from the woman acquainted with heaven touching the earth, who had shown him what being on time with the Father looked like, that word coming from her caused him to recognize that the hour had come. He tells the servants to fill the jars with water. And he turns the water into wine.

It is Jesus' first miracle, and it may seem to us utterly gratuitous. He does not bring someone back from the dead. He does not heal someone of a grievous disease. He does not put to rights some grave injustice. Instead, what our Lord chooses to do is to make delicious wine for people who have already been drinking and who are in no shape to appreciate it. Of all the things Jesus might have done, why spend a miracle — the first of only seven in John's gospel — merely to protect the joy of a couple at their wedding? Couldn't he find something more important to tend to?

The answer to that question is No. Apparently not. The Most High attaches a significance to marriage that places the highest hedges around it. If we're surprised to hear that it is only because we're amnesiac. We've forgotten the immensities that arch over a man and a woman when they start a family, even as they do so standing at an altar set apart to that act of self-giving that makes all things new.

Now back to Carver Blanchard standing on my doorstep. When he said 'praise' what was going on was Cleanth was doing something posthumously and it wasn't that he was praising me or the cookies. He was putting me in mind of a poem for which he had expressed admiration in one of our good talks. Not 'Frankie and Johnny' but a poem written by George Herbert, a priest of the Church and one of England's greatest poets.

Herbert titled it "Praise". It went public when his friend Nicholas Ferrar published a collection of his poetry posthumously. You can find it in our hymnal as hymn 382.

King of glory, King of peace,
I will love thee;
And that love may never cease,
I will move thee.

Thou hast granted my request,
Thou hast heard me;
Thou didst note my working breast,
Thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.

Though my sins against me cried,
Thou didst clear me;
And alone, when they replied,
Thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee;
In my heart, though not in heaven,
I will raise thee.

Small it is in this poor sort
To enroll thee:
E'en eternity's too short
To extol thee.

The hymn "General Seminary" uses six of the seven quatrains Herbert wrote. What it leaves out is the sixth:

Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears,
Thou relentedst:
And when Justice call'd for fears,
Thou disentedst.

Does Herbert refer here to the story of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee? Maybe not. But by relenting of his refusal Jesus set in motion a ministry that culminates in another crisis, one that will bind him to a cross on a hill far away. His mother was near him outside the gates of Jerusalem where the only begotten son in the glory of the Father turned death into life. Amen.