

Sermon

Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 2, Year C (2007)

Reading of the lessons: First Corinthians 12¹⁻¹¹; John 2¹⁻¹¹

If our Gospel lesson this morning was a movie, then the funky music of the '70s would be the soundtrack. There's the band Rare Earth, who sang, "I just want to celebrate another day of living; I just want to celebrate another day of life!" And who can forget the omnipresent Kool & the Gang: "Celebrate good times, come on! Let's celebrate, tonight, cuz everything's going to be alright. Let's celebrate!" Weddings in Christ's day were a pretty significant affair, as reflected in the Greek Orthodox Church where some of these same traditions are unchanged. Weddings lasted for a week and they were full of festivity that bordered on the gluttonous. And, let's face it, just like today, a lot of a person's public perception was built on how well they threw a party. If the wine ran out, the bridegroom suffered intense public shame, and could even be sued by the bride's family for tarnishing their good name. In addition, it was habit that friends of the host would bring some wine along with them, so if you ran out of wine, it was often interpreted that you had few friends, or many friends of low caliber. You can see that these people were serious about their party.

Which is, of course, why folks are so upset when the wine does, indeed, run out. Mary informs Jesus of the problem and he somewhat curtly asks her what that has to do with him. Instead of arguing the point, Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says, much in the way that Pharoah tells his court to do whatever Joseph says back in Genesis when Pharoah gives Joseph complete control over his kingdom to get Egypt out of dire drought. Well, you know the story: Jesus tells the servants to fill some jugs with water and then he turns it to wine. Good wine. Not the Asti Spumanti stuff, or the Ernst and

Julio Gallo stuff, but the Dom Perignon stuff, the Chateau Lafite. And Jesus didn't even take the credit for it; everybody except the servants and the disciples thought the bridegroom simply saved the best for last.

Now that's generosity. And you can't have a celebration without generosity. I was thankful to be invited to a few Christmas parties this past holiday season, and each party was, at its foundation, the same: Someone called up a bunch of people and told them to come over and have some fun. When said guests arrived, there was plenty of food, plenty of drink, and plenty of music. The sum of the party is the generosity of the hosts to their guests, and the guests enjoying the same. What if our worship was like a party? We've already got plenty of food and drink (motion to the Table); we've already got plenty of good music (motion to the choir loft). What if we invited guests to come and celebrate something good with us?

Hey, what if we didn't just stop with worship? What if, instead of sending over twenty thousand more troops to Iraq, we sent 21,500 bottles of Beringer? I know, I know, that's unpragmatic and unrealistic and so on. But so is dying on a cross, and look what that did for us. When you say something like, "Let's send twenty thousand bottles of wine to Iraq" you run the risk of sounding silly at best, or at worst, French: "Maybe if we send over to Iraq some wine and some cheese and a few crepes, they will like us and not shoot us." But John calls this overabundant, generous, reckless water-into-wine thing the 'first' of Jesus' signs. It is first chronologically, in that he did it before he did any of the others. But it is also first in that it is primary: This is the miracle that sets the tone for all the rest. His first miracle wasn't healing a leper or bringing back a little girl from the dead or multiplying a bunch of food for hungry crowds or driving demons out of a man

tortured; his first miracle was making wine for a wedding party; his first miracle was giving the world copious generosity. Another huge song in the '70s was from John Lennon: "Imagine all the people living life in peace. Woo-hoo!" Would that be easier if we launched pre-emptive strikes of generosity? Would our personal relationships be easier if we met conflict with grace, stress with generosity? What would our marriages be like if every time our spouse yelled at us, we did something around the house for them or bought them a box of chocolates or told them we'd watch the kids so they can go out with the guys? What would such wild kindness do to our relationships? This all sounds so touchy-feely, doesn't it? On the face of it, it lacks 'real world' sensibility. But Christians, when we get into a difficult spot, whether it is as a nation at war or a married couple arguing or a coworker in a stressful environment, is it our nature to meet conflict with kindness, or is it easier to lash out in retaliation? Natalie Faunce will quickly remind us that retaliation—on a global scale, on a national scale, on a commonwealth scale, on a personal scale—is the order of the day. When Christ crosses the chasm from heaven to earth, he doesn't retaliate for our having sinned against him; the very first thing he does is meet a sinful people with an act of out of control generosity.

There is new Rocky movie out now—Rocky 92, I think it's called—and in it Rocky Balboa comes out of retirement to fight, we hope, one last time. But there's little of the adrenaline and testosterone that marked the first ninety-one Rocky movies. In this one, Rocky actually goes out of his way to be generous to a down-on-her-luck woman, and even show grace and kindness to his boxing opponent. I won't give away the ending, but suffice it to say that Rocky's generosity changes the way things end up. Generosity changes the way things end up. Christ starts his mission with generosity, and it changes

the way things end up. Christians, we have so much to be thankful for. We have so many good gifts to share. We have so many incredible reasons to celebrate. And we live in a world that is in dire need of celebration—the right way, for the right reason. Perhaps 2007 will find us singing that great hymn by Kool & the Gang: “There’s a party going on right here—a celebration to last throughout the year. So bring your good [friends] and your laughter, too; we’re going to celebrate this party with you.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.