

January 19, 2025
Text: John 2:1-11

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

As St. John concludes the account of the wedding at Cana, he writes this: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” If you stop and ponder that verse for a moment, a question might arise: What did his disciples actually see? In what way did Jesus manifest – show forth – His glory, such that His disciples – which would’ve included John – believed in Him?

This continues a theme in the readings for Epiphany: Jesus is shown to be the Christ, but in ways that aren’t immediately obvious or which don’t make sense at first. In the wedding at Cana, we get a picture of the true glory of Jesus, glory that we can actually behold still today.

To understand how we today can still behold the glory of Jesus, we need to go back to that question I asked at the beginning of this sermon. What did the disciples actually see? Presumably... not much. Sitting next to Jesus, they might have overheard His conversation with His mother. And they would’ve heard Jesus give the commands to the stewards to fill the jars and then take some to the master of the feast. And presumably, they could’ve tasted some of the wine when it was served.

But that was about it. There was no flash of light when the water became wine. The stone jars didn’t turn into gold at the same time. No cloud or smoke or rushing wind filled the room when the stewards drew out the sample. There wasn’t anything we would think of as visible “glory” when this first sign of Jesus took place.

This lack of visible glory shows the contrast between the previous appearances of God on earth and the appearance of God in the flesh – Jesus. When Moses asks to see God’s glory in our Old Testament reading, the Lord tells him that he really doesn’t know what he’s asking for. As God says, “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” The visible glory, the undimmed holiness of God, is too much for any sinful man to behold.

Even secondhand, it is terrifying to man. Think about the Israelites and their terror when the Lord descends onto Mount Sinai. They beg Moses to go up and speak to God on their behalf, because His glory, even sounding from the distant mountaintop, is too much to bear. Or when Moses comes back down after speaking with the Lord – even the reflection of God’s glory coming from Moses’ face is too much. This is also why, whenever an angel appears to someone, the angel’s first words are very often, “Do not be afraid,” because the glory of God that the angel is reflecting is terrifying for man.

To return to our Old Testament reading, the most Moses is able to see and not die is the back of the Lord after He has passed by. So this visible glory of God is not what was beheld at the wedding at Cana – otherwise people would have been fleeing in terror, rather than enjoying the best wine ever made.

So how was Jesus’ glory manifested, then? Similarly to His baptism, a lot was going on that wasn’t visible to the human eye or human reason. Here at Cana, a major shift is taking place in the ministry of Jesus.

This first sign is happening at a wedding. What takes place at a wedding? As the Bible tells us, the main point of a wedding is, “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” That’s how God establishes it in the Garden of Eden. That’s what Jesus quotes to the Pharisees when they ask Him about marriage.

When we think of weddings, we probably think of white dresses, and walking down the aisle, and “You may kiss the bride,” and cake afterward. And those are all good things. But the main thing in a wedding is when a man leaves his parents, and a woman her’s, and the two are joined together to form a new family.

Of course they are still to love their parents – and their new in-laws – but above them now they are to love and cherish and cling to their new spouse. And from this one-flesh union, God will bring forth the next generation, granting new life, as He has since the beginning.

This is what’s going on at this wedding in Cana. Jesus is leaving His old life behind to go forth and begin the work that will bring Him His bride, the Church. He is no longer a carpenter’s son, and Himself a carpenter, from Nazareth. He is now a teacher, with disciples, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God.

You can see this new purpose in the way in which He addresses His mother. When Mary comes to Jesus with the concern about the wine, He responds, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” He doesn’t call her “Mom” or “Mother,” but “Woman.” Now, this doesn’t have the tone of rudeness or disrespect that we might think of if we were to hear someone say that in our day and culture. It was still a polite address.

But it was also somewhat distant, or formal. Jesus is still Mary’s son, and always will be. But He is now stepping into His role as her Savior, her Lord, her God. He is leaving father and mother, as He Himself established in Eden, and walking the path that will bring Him to His bride.

That path will lead to His “hour,” as He says. What is that? John’s Gospel is quite clear: Jesus’ hour is His crucifixion. As Jesus would say later, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” There at the cross, the old covenant, with its repeated washings and sacrifices, will be replaced with the new, the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who will wash His people and take away their sins with the water and blood that flow from His side.

St. Paul speaks about this in our Epistle reading, describing how Jesus gave up His very life on the cross “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

This is foreshadowed at Cana when the six huge stone water jars, used for the frequent Jewish rites of purification, would be filled up now with wine, pointing to the blood of Christ. And whereas those jars before would be filled over and over again for all these old rites, they would be filled with wine only once – by God Himself – showing how His action would never need repeating.

Wine is also associated with joy in the Scriptures. Here, Jesus would show how He would bring joy from a seemingly impossible circumstance – be that running out of wine at a wedding feast, or the horrible death of an innocent man upon the cross. Thus, the glory of Jesus, manifested at this wedding,

was in His heading toward the cross, and in all the signs that pointed to what would happen there. The glory of God is in His sacrificial love to save His people.

This glory isn't glory that's seen with human eyes, or understood by human reason. It's a glory that's beheld by faith. As Jesus tells Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" This is the glory of a God who loves sinners enough to die for them, so that they might live forever with Him.

It's not glory for the sake of impressing anyone or making Jesus look great in human eyes. It's the glory of deeds done that will benefit and bless man, even if man doesn't fully understand what's going on. Jesus never took credit for making all the wine – only His disciples, His mother, and the stewards knew where it came from. Jesus performed His signs so that people might be directed to His word, through which He grants saving faith. That faith lets us actually behold the glory of God.

Again, this side of heaven, no man can see the full visible glory of God and live. And so Jesus conceals His glory, placing it in humble things, so that man might actually be able to experience it. He places His glory, His truth, His wisdom, in the pages of the Bible – a book that many mock as quaint, outdated, or just plain wrong, yet which has been preserved despite countless efforts to destroy it. God places His glory, His divine life, in the waters of Baptism, giving that water His almighty power through His unbreakable promise. He places His glory, His own flesh and blood, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, that the same man who can't look on His face and live might eat and drink Him as the new and perfect sacrifice.

And to come back to the event that is the focus of Gospel today, God places His glory in the institution of marriage. Now, marriage doesn't grant the grace of God or the forgiveness of sins, like the Word and the Sacraments. But nevertheless, in Christian marriage, Christ gives us a picture, a representation of His love for His bride, the Church.

That's what God the Holy Spirit is revealing in Ephesians 5. When a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, loving her more than anyone else, including himself, sacrificing for her good, patiently bearing with her faults, remaining faithful in good times and in bad – through that man Christ is showing His glory in a picture of His love for His bride.

When a woman leaves her father and mother and clings to her husband, submitting to him even when she thinks she might have a better way of doing something, caring for him and respecting him – through that woman Christ is showing His glory through the love that He has poured into the hearts of His people through faith, who then submit to Him and trust Him as the God who perfectly loves and cares for them. In faithful Christian marriages, God shows forth His glory.

Apart from faith, the world cannot grasp the glory that God has given to marriage, which is why it attacks it so much, seeking to redefine it, or cheapen it, or make it seem unnecessary or even burdensome. Satan hates marriage and constantly attacks it through temptations, lies, and afflictions. But the Lord who established marriage still upholds it and gives it His glory. Through marriage, God blesses the world with stable families, children raised in love, healthier communities.

Even more, marriage and family is the main place where God designed for the saving faith to be passed on from one generation to the next. Shortly after speaking of husbands and wives, St. Paul

addresses fathers, saying, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This is why the Christian Church upholds and defends marriage, because the glory of God, His love for His people, and the salvation of future generations are all connected to it.

Will we fall short in our own marriages? Yes, of course! But when we do, we ask our Lord – and our spouse – for forgiveness, and know that Christ cleansed that spot, along with all the rest. And then we ask Him for strength to be more faithful, more patient, more loving in our marriage, that our Father in heaven and His beloved Son may be glorified in our lives, for all the world to see.

In this life, the glory of God is often hidden, seen not with the eyes of flesh but with the eyes of faith. It is seen in marriage, in the Sacraments, in the Word of God. It is manifested both to bring unbelievers to faith and to strengthen the faith of those who do believe. As St. John writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In Jesus, whenever and wherever He comes to us, we have the glory of God.

In His holy name, amen.