

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD WITH US

John 2: 1 – 11 January 17, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Epiphany – the manifestation of God’s presence among us. We connect Epiphany with the star that led the Magi to the Christ Child. Foreigners. God’s presence for all as represented by these travelers from the East.

Last Sunday, we looked at the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus heard this voice of God from the heavens, “You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

Today in the Gospel lesson in John, we have this story of Jesus attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee. God with us. And it is a story about a common, every day event in the life of a community. Jesus attends a wedding reception. It is a celebration. Those who want to dress Christianity in serious, solemn faces, afraid to smile and be happy will have trouble with this story. So will those who want to keep Jesus away from drinking wine. I actually heard a minister say, in a sermon, “Well, Jesus made the wine, but he did not drink it.” It is like, Jesus is not a real person. Really.

To me it is important that John says this is the first sign that Jesus did to reveal his glory. It is not a healing of the crippled, restoring sight to the blind, or casting out demons. It is making wine at a wedding feast so the hosts would not be embarrassed and that there would be enough wine for the party. This sign is at a wedding reception – a celebration that is common to all – every community. Here, at the beginning of the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, he shows up where we are. Sometimes, we like to try to separate the secular world from the sacred world. In this story, Jesus does not separate sacred and secular world. Jesus shows up at a wedding party.

My preaching professor said that we should never preach on a miracle story. His take was that “many people do not believe them. They think they are untrue and you will lose that crowd before you ever get started.” Maybe he was right and some of you today will just use this time to check up on your new year’s resolutions. That may turn out to be not anymore fruitful than miracle stories if your resolutions aren’t in better shape than mine.

The wedding is in Cana, some three and a half miles from Nazareth. The mother of Jesus is at the wedding. The writer of the Gospel of John never uses the name, Mary, for the mother of Jesus. He always says, “The mother of Jesus.” The text says that Jesus and his disciples are also invited to the wedding. I think it important that Jesus is not apart from human happiness. The passage points to the observation and kindness of the mother of Jesus. Does she know this family? Is she on intimate terms with them? Could be, since Nazareth is only three and a half miles from Cana. Maybe Mary notices some whispering in the crowd and some growing embarrassment. Some how, she knew something was wrong. She speaks to Jesus. “They have no wine.” It is the worst thing that could happen at a wedding party. Jesus doesn’t seem to want to get involved. To me, it is easier to deal with the turning water to wine than to deal with the attitude of Jesus. . But Mary appeals to Jesus and then she instructs the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” In other words, “Don’t worry, he will find a way to fix it.” Jesus uses the servants as his fellow workers and fixes the problem. And everyone is now talking about why the hosts saved the best wine until last.

It is important that this text helps us understand that the world is not divided up into two parts – sacred and secular. Peter Berger, a sociologist back in the 60’s tried to address this problem by saying that the

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man who played with his children in the back yard on Sunday afternoon was not the same man who went to the office of Monday. He divided the world into the realms of sacred and secular. But from a Christian point of view, we are connected to God – in our work, in our family, in our worship – God comes to us – much like Jesus coming to the wedding party in Cana. Christianity is more than a set of cold, abstract, theological principles. Christianity is a living reaction to God who is among us. Take care when you leave the wedding ceremony. God is not just present in the ceremony. God is also at the reception.

I was fortunate to go with our interfaith study group to the Balkans. We had worked together on how is it that faith deals with tragedy. How do people learn to live together again after they have experienced lack of faithfulness and trust among themselves? How were they dealing with that issue after the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans? To find some answers, we wanted to try to learn how the Orthodox, Moslems and Roman Catholics were living together after the war in the Balkans. It was a good trip and we discovered that ten years later, the church had just begun barely to get people together to work on issues of living together.

On our journey through Bosnia, our guides took us to Medugorje. At this site, about 1000 years ago, Mary appeared to a peasant. They can take you to the exact spot and everything. It is really too much. This huge complex has grown up there. There is this huge church. So many people visiting on the day we were there that the priests had set up portable confession booths outside on the grounds. There were so many shops selling all sorts of trinkets – statues of Mary, all sorts of crosses. The prices were high and to me it was just a fleecing of the flock. I can't imagine how much money that place takes in each year. I believe the Roman Church is embarrassed by all of it, but it takes in so much money, what are they going to do about it. I have a friend who has a collection of crosses that people have given him. So, I was trying to select a cross from this huge collection. I was not doing well with the selection. Maybe it was just all the commercialism and the high prices. A vendor approached me with a trinket and the words, "Take a little remembrance with you. Take Jesus with you?" I did find a cross for my friend and actually bought it.

This miracle story from Cana reminds me that we don't take Christ with us. He comes to us and is in our common life. I don't know how much of this miracle story you want to believe. I doubt we should brush off this story as if it has nothing to say to us. I believe that the presence of God in our lives is most important to those of us who call ourselves Christian. That presence of God is a constant reminder of who we are as the People of God.