



The Party Person

John 2:1-12

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This month we're taking a look at the person of Jesus. Often, Jesus is talked about as a storybook legend or a storyteller's myth. In describing Jesus in such vague and non-human ways, we not only fail to grasp the reality of God-made-flesh, but such claims let us write off faithfulness as an unattainable ideal. When the person we profess as Lord is but a mythical immortal, we allow ourselves to live in human error with little conviction that change in our lives is necessary. If Jesus' example is unattainable, why should we be attempting to live according to his witness?

Faithfulness to the will of God is not so easily escapable for those who profess Christ as Lord. For Christ was not a myth or legend, but indeed was God made flesh, perfect in his divinity, but also perfect in his humanity. Jesus fully shared in our humanity. Amidst his incredible super-human acts, such as walking on the water, Jesus shared in the normative experiences and pains of humanity. We can read in the Scriptures stories where he spits in the dirt, where he bled and felt pain at the lashes of the Roman centurions, where he experienced exhaustion and fatigue after walking on the road for a full day, where he got angry and expressed his irritation in both verbal and physical lashes, and even stories where his only response to grief was to break down and weep.

As we discussed last week in looking at Jesus' identity as a vagabond, the man who is Jesus is not what you would expect as the one who God claims as Son, sends as Messiah, and raises as Savior. But in learning more about the identities of Christ, in naming the truths of the Biblical teaching regarding Jesus, we can claim a better understanding of our call as faithful followers. Today, we are looking at the community driven nature of Jesus, as he exemplified the life of a party person. "Nowhere is Jesus' human nearness more apparent than in the portrayal of Jesus as moving from one dinner party to the next."ⁱ

Our text for today in John's Gospel is named as Jesus' first miracle. Jesus was at a wedding with his mother and his disciples. The text tells us they had all been invited. This minor note in and of itself says something about how Jesus carried himself in relationship with others. Jesus was not simply some vagabond rabbi who wandered from town to town, healing folk, dropping preaching bombs against the Pharisaic nature of narcissistic righteousness, and then departing. Jesus was in the practice of developing real relationships with others, to the extent that they wanted him to join in their wedding festivities.

At this particular wedding, the wine gave out prematurely. I don't know if you've ever been to a wedding reception where the beverages gave out early. Such a situation usually indicates a combination of two factors: the family and / or the caterer didn't plan enough, and the

attendees are having a very good time. In the first century, such a failure of planning was seen as a detrimental mistake for the wedding family, and could bring lasting shame on the family.

When the wine runs out, Jesus' mother turns to him and says, 'They have no wine.' Mary could be indicating that she simply wants Jesus to make a Total Wine run, though the rest of the passage hints that she knew he could do more. Keep in mind, according to John's Gospel, Jesus has not yet performed any acts that would indicate he has the ability to miraculously fix the situation. But, Jesus' mother seems to know otherwise. Her coming to him makes me wonder what kind of small things Jesus had been doing as a child, teenager, or twenty-something. Had Mary seen him do unexplainable things in the past? Like the cartoon picture of baby Jesus in the bathtub, did a young Jesus split the bathwater to the opposite ends of the tub creating a mini-parting of the sea? Had Mary seen signs of Jesus' divine powers?

Jesus responds to her, "Woman, what concern is this to you and me? My hour has not yet come." If you follow the narrative of John's gospel, Jesus uses this phrase multiple times. In chapter 2, 6, 7, 8, Jesus keeps his followers updated, "The hour is not yet here." It's not until chapter 17, just before his arrest in the garden, that Jesus' wording changes as he prays to God, saying, "Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you."

He says to his mother, 'this is not our concern.' Mary responds, telling the servants who were standing nearby, "Do whatever he tells you." A mother's intuition perhaps, she knows Jesus will respond. Jesus sees six stone water jars, not completely filled, sitting nearby; these jars are used for the Jewish rites of purification – that is, the ritual act of cleansing. The jars represent this history of the Jewish community; they represent the old order. Jesus tells the servants to fill them to the brim. After doing so, he tells them to take some out and take it to the chief stewards. (Perhaps in our modern day lingo, you could say, take it to the sommelier.)

The som tastes the wine and calls to the groom, shocked at the high quality of the wine. He says to the groom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then they offer inferior wine once everyone is drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now!"

The act, being Jesus' first miracle, indicates the new work of God that will be offered in Christ. "Changing the pots of water into pots flowing over with good wine becomes a metaphor for Jesus' ministry as he brings vitality to the ancient religion."ⁱⁱ But beyond the indication of God's new work in the ancient religion that will be offered in the life of Jesus, this miraculous act indicates the way through which Jesus will live and teach. Jesus is not some exclusively spiritual being that is "hermetically sealed from where you actually live,"ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus is going to be with people, engaging with people, sharing in life together with those around him.

"As a supremely social, communal person, whatever it was that Jesus felt called by his heavenly Father to do, he had no interest in doing it by himself. His life implies that we are fully human, not in our solitude or loneliness but only through a web of relationships and connections with others, including God."^{iv} His lived witness demonstrates this over and over. Let's consider some of Jesus' dining experiences.

A quick scan through the Gospels and you find that Jesus shared in many meals. He feasted with the multitudes at least twice, sharing once in a meal with over 4000 people and again with 5000 people. Jesus ate dinner at the house of Simon the leper, Levi the tax collector, and Zacchaeus (the wee-little man). At least twice, Jesus ate at the homes of Pharisees. Jesus had a fish fry with Peter on the shore line, and he dined with Mary and Martha. He had the last supper with the disciples, and then twice after his resurrection he dined and broke bread with others.

Jesus was willing to wine and dine with those the majority culture rejected. Referring back to last week, looking at Jesus' identity as a vagabond, we know Jesus spent a great deal of time with those who were considered outcasts. He found himself dining with many of these outcasts, and those dinners weren't always by the invitation of the host. Jesus was known for telling others, as he does with Zacchaeus, I'm coming to your house for dinner.

When he was invited for dinner, it wasn't always to the host's benefit. At the house of one Pharisee, Jesus is approached by a woman of the city, who lets her hair down and bathes his feet in her tears. The host, Simon, chastises Jesus and rebukes him, saying if he were truly a prophet, he would know the sins of the woman and would refuse her. Jesus in return rebukes the host, saying not only does he know the sins of the woman, but Jesus says she offered a better welcome than the host himself, who did not offer any water for Jesus to cleanse his feet. In turn, Jesus welcomes the woman who washed his feet with her tears, and forgives her sins on account of her faithfulness, embarrassing the host.

At another dinner party, again, held at the house of a Pharisee, Jesus watched as the guests arrived and began to claim the seats of honor at the table – those seats closest to the host's chair. Jesus uses their poor etiquette to teach them about faithfulness. "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted."^v After instructing the dinner guests, Jesus turns on the host himself. "And you," he goes on, "when you throw a lunch or dinner party, don't just invite the rich and wealthy neighbors that you know could repay your invitation and invite you to a dinner in return. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will then be blessed because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Following his reprimanding of the host, Jesus tells the Parable of the Great Dinner. Not only did Jesus attend dinner parties, he used dinner parties as examples in his teachings. A man throws a party for all his wealthy friends, Jesus begins, but the man's friends responded one by one that they were unable to attend. The host of the banquet, insulted by his friends, gets upset. But, he had already paid for the catering. So he calls his servants and tells them to go out and bring in "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." Blessed are those who dine at the Almighty Host's table. "The kingdom of heaven is a party with a bunch of [people the world may call losers] whom [many of us] wouldn't be caught dead with on a Saturday night."^{vi} Yet, this is God's idea of a great time.

Being present at parties, dining with friends and foes, it is part of who Jesus is. His desire is to share in life with others, and where better to share with one another than around the table. But his example as a party person, and his teaching by using parties as examples, was not just a part of his own witness, such merriment was exemplified in the life of those who followed him.

In Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees are questioning Jesus about the difference between his disciples, their disciples, and the disciples of John the Baptist. (Remember, John had come before Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus to come. John baptized with water, but his work was a precursor for Jesus, who would baptize with water and the Spirit.) The Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "John's disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink."^{vii} ... Our disciples, they say, like those of John before you, they were righteous and pious in their faith. They prayed and fasted. They were examples of what we believe it looks like to be faithful. But your disciples, they are partiers – eating and drinking. How is that a witness of faithful living?

Jesus tells them, "When the bridegroom shows up, do the wedding guests look sad? NO! It's party time!" When you have the freedom and joy of the glory of God in your midst, you don't pray for what you're hoping will come, you celebrate the gift that is already here. The disciples celebrated, wining and dining like Jesus, in celebration of the promise of God delivered in the life of Jesus Christ.

So the first question we should consider is, are we partying enough? Are we celebrating life with one another as if we are confident and thankful for the gifts of God, and the glory of God made known to us in Christ our Lord?

And secondly, what do our parties look like? Perhaps this is the harder question to answer. For many of us, parties are not only a way to connect with one another, but they are a chance to get away from the demands of life. We often dress up and engage in the revelry because parties give us a chance to break from the humdrum and dullness of our day to day work lives. But such partying is a far cry from the witness of Christ. "In his partying, Jesus rejects a temporary respite from this world; he shows [his disciples and his dinner guests] a glimpse of this world healed, finished, redeemed, and restored to what God originally wanted."^{viii}

Are the dinner parties you host and attend simply offering you a break from the monotony of life? Or are they celebrating the great love of God which offers healing, hope, and new life to all?

One of the more well known dinner parties Jesus attended was the Last Supper, held in the upper room in Jerusalem; it was his final meal before the crucifixion, celebrated with his closest of friends. It is that meal that we celebrate each week in worship. In some ways, it is a solemn meal. We gather around the table to remember the sacrifice of God in Jesus Christ. But the meal is not meant to be a time of grieving. We celebrate communion each week as a reminder of the great joy of God's eternal grace that gives us new life in the midst of a challenging and heart-breaking world. It's an opportunity to party with one another and to rejoice that even in

our most difficult weeks, in weeks when we may have made many errors, in weeks we have failed to share God's mercy with others, in weeks where the world around us continues to show internal and international conflict, we can still come and dine at the table with one another rejoicing as one body over God's great love.

On Sunday morning – as we gather and celebrate this holy meal – we come together for what is the first dinner party of the week. But I hope it's not your last. You won't hear a pastor say this often, but I'll claim it and say it now – I want you to party more. I want you to host the best parties in town. I want you to attend great parties in the area. I want you to dine with each other. I want you to celebrate with your neighbors. I want you to follow in Jesus' direction and welcome to dinner the people on the streets, the people in the alleys, the people in your courtyards, the people in the homes next door.

As you gather with one another, as you share with one another in life, as you get together and break bread with others, may every party you attend be for you an extension of this table, that with everyone you meet, with everyone you raise a glass with, with everyone you take out, and with everyone you bring in, you may rejoice in the great glory and love of God. If you want to join in the work of God in the world, taking direction from the party person should come easy. May you party with the best of them, and share God's great love at every meal, that the Father above may receive all the glory. Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon. *Why Jesus?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Linda McKinnish Bridges. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 4.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v NRSV. Luke 14:7.

^{vi} Willimon.

^{vii} NRSV. Luke 5:33.

^{viii} Willimon.