

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

A Sermon on John 2:1-12

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Attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, "Why is the bride dressed in white?" "Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life," her mother tried to explain, keeping it simple. The child thought about this for a moment, then said, "So why's the groom wearing black?"

Why is it that we have so many negative stereotypes about weddings? Back when Tammy and I were dating, I had a co-worker ask me, "When are you going to get married and be miserable like the rest of us?" Bachelor parties are painted as the last night of fun before you get tied down. Sadly, for many marriages, these stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies. In many marriages, the husband and wife are living parallel but separate lives – each doing his or her own thing without much intersection with the other. They live for years with the vague sense that there should be much more abundance and joy, but they haven't the foggiest idea how to get there.

This malaise infects relationships, but it doesn't stop there. Some people sadly approach their jobs, their hobbies, even their faith with this same sense of being weighed down. They feel stuck in a rut. The passion has been sucked out of their lives, and there is a hunger for renewal, a hope for a fresh start, a yearning for something new.

Last week, we talked about how Nathaniel was disappointed and became a cynic, and how Christ spoke to his inner longings. Nathaniel professed belief, and Christ promised that he'd show even greater things. This week, we see Christ start to make good on that promise. Our passage this morning gives us a taste of the new possibilities that come to us through Christ. Best of all, it gives us this taste in the context of a party!

NEW CREATION (John 2:1)

John tells us that on the third day a wedding took place in Cana. This is an interesting detail because through most of his gospel, John is not specific about time. The two main places where he counts sequences of days are the raising of Lazarus and in these first two chapters. When John counts days, he does so for a specific purpose. In this case, when John says this wedding happened on the third day, we need to reckon this counting as a part of the greater sequence in chapters 1 and 2. After counting all the days enumerated from chapter 1 and chapter 2, we find that this wedding takes place on the

seventh day. John, in his subtle manner, parallels these seven days of Jesus' early ministry to the creation week. The six days of calling disciples ends with a seventh day of rest at a wedding party. John uses this new creation imagery to highlight the significance of Jesus' ministry.

Now, combine this creation imagery with the Old Testament images of wedding banquets and new wine. Passages like Isaiah 55:1; Joel 3:18; and Amos 9:13-15 use this imagery to symbolize the coming end of the age. Go back later and read these passages within their greater context. John combines the creation imagery and the end-times imagery to indicate that Jesus provides something more than a personal self-help program. Jesus makes possible a renewal for all of creation. John explains this renewal through the rest of the gospel, but in this passage, we get a glimpse of how it affects our relationships, our wholeness, and our purpose.

NEW RELATIONSHIP (John 2:2-4)

Jesus brings renewal to our relationships. Look at verses 2-4 to see the changing relationship of Jesus with his mother. Notice how Jesus responds to his mother. I like the way the NIV translates it: "Dear Woman, why do you involve me." Some translations make it sound much harsher. Jesus is respectfully and gently distancing himself from his mother. Rather than addressing her as mother, he calls her "woman." He subtly indicates that the nature of their relationship is changing. Until now, she had enjoyed special privilege as Jesus' mother, but now she had to begin to learn how to be a disciple. This process would be painful for her. She would feel rejected; she would watch Jesus die; and she would also come to realize that she too had to kneel at the cross of her king. She would have to let go of some of the privileges of mother, but in so doing the new relationship would give her something greater and deeper than before. This is not to say that Jesus stopped being Mary's son, but only that the nature of the relationship changed: the old transformed into something new.

If that was true for Mary, then it is also true for us. When our relationship with Christ is the most important relationship in our life, it transforms all our earthly relationships into something new. Not only does Christ give instructions for relationships in this book, but he also renews and transforms us from the inside.

This inner transformation enables us to view our relationships less from the perspective of "What can this person do for me?" and more from the perspective of "How does our relationship bring glory to God?" It enables us to turn off the TV and tune in to our children. It enables us to forego a Saturday of golf to spend time with a lonely aunt or a lonesome uncle. It enables us to say,

“I’m sorry,” to affirm the good in the other person. When we bow to Christ as our king, we learn to sacrifice our wants so that we may show the love of Christ to those around us.

NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PURIFICATION (John 2:5-10)

Not only does Jesus bring renewal to our relationships, but he also brings renewal to our wholeness. Look at verses 5-10. The six stone jars contained water used for the ceremonial washing of guests’ hands and cooking utensils. These washings were not just to take care of dirt. God’s demand for purity was administered through the tedium of countless sacrifices and washings. The unspoken belief is that through proper observance of the ritual for cleaning the outside, we’ll be clean on the inside. We’ll be whole before a holy God.

Recently I read an article by acclaimed novelist Alice Walker. She wrote about the impending execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a man whom many believe to have been framed on charges of murder. She writes to the many who are hoping for Abu-Jamal’s release, and in the event of his execution, she prescribes a ritual. Using New Age imagery, she says that “Mother Ocean” has told her to bring Abu-Jamal’s spirit to her through ritual. She tells her readers to go to the ocean, or any body of water, and compose an altar comprised of the photographs of Abu-Jamal, his lawyer, the judge who sentenced him, and the Governor who refused to pardon him. Prop them up with four stones, representing the bones of our ancestors. Light candles and sage and incense. Speak your heart to the ocean, then burn the photographs. Bless the ashes and send them out to sea with flowers. Finally, have an orange and go home with your friends and family and share a meal, talking and answering questions about injustice. What struck me about Walker’s article was how she urges her readers to use ritual to connect with something deeper and beyond themselves. The ritual is not a magical formula that makes the connection happen, but rather it is a gateway through which a true seeker can find that connection. The ritual is an aide to focus the individual’s reach to connect with that undefinable “something out there.” It still seems that there is a yearning for something we can do to connect us to eternity.

Christ comes on the scene and blows rituals away. He takes the instruments for the ritual and uses them in a totally new way. Rather than the jars being used as instruments through which man can reach to God, the jars become vehicles for God’s blessing to man. What once held water that man used to wash and to approach God now held wine generously provided by God for man’s enjoyment. Whereas wholeness was once achieved through ritual, it now comes through relationship with a living, breathing person who provides the best wine for the feast. Jesus gives us a new way to become whole.

NEW LEVEL OF BELIEF (John 2:11)

Not only does Jesus bring renewal to our relationships and to our need for wholeness, but he also brings renewal to our very belief. Look at verse 11. The miracle is called a sign, and at that sign his disciples believed. Jesus' words and deeds were signs about who he is. In the same way, the Scriptures themselves, and the evidence of the transformed lives of those in the church, are signs proclaiming Christ as King.

So we've seen that Christ brings renewal to all things, and that this passage highlights renewal in relationships, wholeness, and faith. As I said before, it's done in the context of a party. This was not a somber occasion – this was a celebration! Wedding feasts in those times could go on for days. This was a festive affair. Similarly, the renewal that Christ works within us is a cause for celebration. We in the church should be celebrating and partying because of what God has done and is doing in his people.

Evangelist and author Tony Campolo was in Honolulu for a speaking engagement. Jetlag kept him drowsy by day and awake at night, so he found himself walking the streets at 3:30 a.m. looking for a bite. He went in to a "greasy spoon" diner, took a seat, and ordered a donut and coffee. Shortly after he was served, a group of eight or nine prostitutes came in. They were loud and crude and garishly clad, and they sat down for a bite to eat and some rest. Eventually, Tony overheard one of the ladies say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39." "So what do you want from me," shot back one of her friends, "a birthday party?" "Come on," replied the first, "why do you have to be so mean. I was just saying. That's all. I don't want anything from you. Why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my life. Why should I have one now?"

Tony made a decision. After the girls left, he asked the man behind the counter, "Do they come in every night?" "Yeah" "The one next to me, does she come in?" "Yeah, that's Agnes. She's here every night. What of it?" "Because tomorrow is her birthday. Let's do something about that. Let's throw a party." A huge grin broke out on the man's face, "I like that." He called to his wife in back and they planned the whole thing. The man and his wife would provide cake and refreshments, Tony would come back at 2:30 a.m. with decorations.

At 3:15 the next morning, the place was covered with streamers and happy birthday signs and little paper napkins that said "Happy Birthday." The man's wife must've gotten the word out on the streets because the place was packed with prostitutes. When Agnes came in there was a big shout of "Surprise." She staggered and her eyes moistened while the crowd sang happy birthday. Just before they were about to cut the cake, she asked if she could take it home to show her family. She promised she'd be right back. After she'd

slipped out, there was an awkward silence until Tony belted out, "What do you say we pray." So there, surrounded by a bunch of prostitutes, Tony prayed for Agnes and her salvation and her life situation, and that God would be good to her.

That night, in that birthday party/prayer meeting, those prostitutes heard about a God who could give them new relationships based on sacrificial love rather than physical gratification. They heard about a God who could give them new wholeness and purity even after they'd felt so empty for so long. They heard about a God in whom they could have faith even though they had lost faith so long ago. And they heard that in the context of a party.