

“Contemplating Cana ”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 2.1-12

February 1, 2015

Today’s reading is the same as last week’s. I led us through it, trying to understand it and hear lessons the Holy Spirit might be giving us.

This morning, we are going to hear the Spirit speak to us again through the same story of Jesus. But differently.

First, let’s hear it.

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.

When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “What are you trying to do with me, woman? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Whatever he tells you to do, do it.”

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.

When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people are light-headed, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

John 2.1-12

Adapted from the English Standard Version

God gives us rationality and understanding, so we can read the Bible and learn from it.

God also gives us our senses and imaginations. One way we can open these is by looking at pictures. Pictures can connect us to our emotions, and can bring us into deep truths. Looking upon an image can help us experience a familiar Bible story in new ways. The artist becomes our companion as we experience a story of Jesus together. Our senses and imaginations can open us to wonder, and mystery, and deeper prayer.

So today we're going to look at a picture of the Wedding at Cana.

II

I've chosen this icon from the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition.¹



¹ I found this image here, though it is on many websites:
http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-R0-aExZUK5M/U_8zenRXnII/AAAAAAAAAKuM/ifcLLYoTI/s1600/1.jpg
I have been unable to find artist or other information about it.

Icon means “image.” The icon-painter (or icon-writer, as they call them) tries to represent the scene theologically. In other words, the goal is not a snapshot of what it actually looked like. An icon expresses what it means.

An icon is like a window. A window is something you look at, to look through, to see something else. A good window does not distort what you want to see. It does not change it. It lets you see what is other side as it really is. A good sermon or reflection works like that too. What I say is only good if it lets you see through it, and behold more of God and what God is saying to you. An icon is a visual sermon.

When I speak, I follow rules of vocabulary and grammar (most of the time). When iconographers “write” their icons, they are following a grammar and vocabulary of methods and symbols which are deeply traditional. Iconography is not about being innovative. It is about revealing truth.

III

Let me show you some things in this icon.²

- The **buildings** in the background tell us it is in a town. The cloth draped on the building signals it is happening inside. (These are some conventions of icon writing.)
- The **angles of the table and Jesus’ chair** are intentional. They draw us into the scene. We are not bystanders, but welcome participants.
- The **table** itself is filled with eggs, fruit, and bread. In the Bible, the feast is an image for God’s Kingdom. That is when God brings everything to fullness and completion, when there is abundance and justice, and when God ends death and flourishes life.³
- We see some **guests** on the left, and on the right are **the disciples who have followed Jesus** so far in the story.⁴
- The **Bride** wears a crown. That is common in icons. The Eastern Church connects the bride to Sophia, wisdom. Sophia-Wisdom is the first and most beautiful in God’s creation.⁵
- The **Couple** has everything, except wine. They need Jesus to provide it. Wine signifies life, and he gives life to his creation.

² I’ve used information from *The Orant* blog by Billy Kangas on Patheos.com (www.patheos.com/blogs/billykangas/2010/01/reading-the-wedding-at-cana-icon.html) and a description of a similar icon on the product page of *The Printery House of Conception Abbey* (www.printeryhouse.org/icons/M16.asp)

³ See, for example, Isaiah 25.6 and Matthew 22.1ff.

⁴ In John 1: Andrew and unnamed disciple, Peter, Philip and Nathanael.

⁵ See Proverbs 8.

- **Mary** stands behind Jesus. She wears blue, signifying her humanity. She is wrapped in red, which symbolizes the divine life which has come upon her. Mary stands for the Community of Disciples, the Church. Interestingly, the Couple are looking to her in their need, not to Jesus. For the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, this points to Mary's role of bringing our requests to her Son. We who are Protestants, who honour Mary but do not revere her in that way, see it differently. Still, this can point us to prayer. As we bring our needs to Christ, we do so in the company of each other, as the Church who Mary symbolizes.
- **Jesus** wears colours which are the reverse of Mary's. Under, he wears red clothes. He is divine, God the Word, God the Son. He also wears blue, for in Jesus the Son became fully human, became with us, with all the completeness of who we are and are made to be.
- Finally, we have the two **Servants** in the front. They are drawn smaller, showing their status. Still, their role is vital. They are the ones who listen to Jesus and do as he says. They are model disciples. One is pouring water into the vessels. The other has drawn wine and is presenting it . . . to Jesus!

If you remember the story, the servants took the water Jesus turned to wine, and brought it to the Master of the Feast, the head waiter. He tasted it and marvelled at its quality, without knowing where it came from.

In this icon, however, they bring the wine to Jesus. There is no head waiter. Jesus is the Master, the Host, the One who prepares everything, making sure it is right for the celebration.

Can you see, then, how the icon writer has taken the details of the story, and retold them in light, lines and colour so we can see deeper meaning? We can see through this to Jesus, the Master of the Feast who gives life to his creation and his church, who hears our needs and responds to them.

IV

For the next few minutes, I'm going to leave this icon up and play some music. You might take this time to pray on it.

How is this piece helping you connect with the story more deeply?
With whom do you most identify here? Why?
How do you see God at work here?

Is there wine that God is drawing from this scene and giving to you?

Let us pray.