**Miracles that Matter**

A sermon by The Rev. Chris Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

As an oldest child, I grew up with a keen understanding of the value that comes from just being first. Now, my five siblings would likely all make a strong argument for their place in the birth order as being the best. But I know I’m right. Call it the anchor effect, or the trailblazer phenomenon, or whatever, being first just comes with all kinds of unearned privileges.

It’s not just family, society too massively overvalues just being first. Take the New Hampshire presidential primary election. All due respect to those watching from New Hampshire this morning, you have a lovely state. But there is no earthly reason why a small state whose demographics don’t look like anything like the nation’s as a whole should have the unearned privilege of going first in our presidential nominating process (and thereby influencing everything after). But they do. Why? Because they’re first. Have been for a long time. So it sticks around.

This phenomenon occurs in the church, too. Take today’s Bible passage – Jesus’ *first* miracle: turning water into wine at the Wedding of Cana. Now if I stopped 100 people on the street and asked them to name a miracle of Jesus, I’d be you that “water into wine” makes the top three…probably alongside walking on water and the loaves and fishes. Why? Because people wine, I guess, but mostly because it’s first. And because it’s first we hear about it all the time. It’s the only miracle mentioned at every wedding service, which frankly is the only time a lot of people find themselves in church. But unlike Jesus’ miracles that feed people or heal people, at its core, this “first miracle” doesn’t do very much that’s of value at all. It’s a miracle, sure, but it’s basically a party trick. Turning water into wine is hardly a miracle that matters.

And here’s the thing, because the miracle itself doesn’t matter all that much, in every century of the church, Biblical scholars and theologians have tried to kind of create meaning and symbolism and allegory around this parable to make it mean more than it does. For example, some have argued that the Wedding Feast at Cana matters because it was actually the wedding of Simon the Zealot, who, so impressed by Jesus’ miracle working became his disciple. There is literally no evidence in the Bible to support this claim. Here’s another one: The Wedding Feast at Cana matters because it indicates that Jesus cares about marriage and thinks it an honorable and good thing to do. Now, I’m a big believer in marriage, but come on. Jesus merely being present at one hardly implies his approval. I think we all know people who attend weddings who couldn’t care less about the vows being made. And here’s a third: Jesus and Mary were worried about the host being embarrassed because they had not provided enough wine, and so Jesus, in his desire to care for someone who had either planned poorly or didn’t have the resources to host a proper wedding, stepped in to help. Again, no evidence here for any of this. And it runs counter to the Gospel of John’s entire miracle program, in which Jesus is pretty clear that he doesn’t perform miracles to right wrongs or to reward or to punish. I could go on, but the rest of the symbolic and allegorical meaning heaped upon this minor miracle, start to veer into the anti-Semitic, and are not worth repeating.

I think you get my point – history is working very hard to maintain the privileged status of Jesus’ first miracle. And the question is why?

Now, miracles mattered a lot to building up the credibility of Jesus is in the early years and centuries of the newly forming church. And this continued well through the middle ages. But I would venture to say that among many of us in the 21st century, the miracles of Jesus are more of an obstacle to our faith than a foundation for it. Like Thomas Jefferson, perhaps we often wish they had been cut out of the Gospels to help make them more believable. I’ll admit to feeling that way at various points in my own life – particularly about miracles like this one, which seem to be little more than party tricks. But these days, I’m starting to think that miracles maybe do have more of a place in the post-modern life of faith than we think. These days, what seems to matter more than miracles, are miracles that matter. What I mean is that the miracles that matter to me, aren’t necessarily the ones that Jesus is shown to have performed during his earthly ministry. Rather, I care about the miracles that people perform every day because of their faith in God, because of their believe in love, because of their compassion for others. I care about miracles that change the world or at least the heart of another person, miracles that bring healing or at least solace amidst suffering, miracles that repair injustice or at least turn our attention towards it – miracles that matter.

We think of the miracles of faith as resulting from supernatural intervention in the world. God moves mountains. But what if miracles are a result of supernatural intervention in the lives of ordinary people of faith? What if we are the miracle? What if miracles are what happens when we accept, cultivate, and nourish our own spiritual gifts and those of others?

It’s no accident that this “first miracle” Gospel is paired in today’s lectionary with St. Paul’s writing about the variety of spiritual gifts that are found not in Jesus, but in the people who make up the Body of Christ – in you and in me and in all those who strive to live the Way of Love. There are many and diverse spiritual gifts, which come from the one Spirit. And the Spirit gives these gifts not just so there can be cool party tricks, but “for the Common Good” for the mission of God in the world, for the Way of Love to grow. What if our spiritual gifts are actually the way we make miracles that matter?

Those with the gifts of understanding, patience and wisdom we call teachers, mentors, coaches, scout leaders. You are making miracles that matter. Those with the gifts of healing and scientific understanding and compassion, we call health care workers, researchers, vaccine developers. You are making miracles that matter. Those with the gifts of language and communication, we call interpreters, lawyers, hostage negotiators, diplomats, artists, poets. You are making miracles that matter. Those with the gifts of prophecy and discernment we call advocates, reformers, protestors, candidates, leaders. You are making miracles that matter.

St. Paul’s list in his letter to the Corinthians was hardly meant to be exhaustive. There are many, many other spiritual gifts which God has given to us in unique and specific ways. Some have the gift of honesty, others of vulnerability, or stamina, or stillness, or listening, or playfulness, or concern, or persistence, or organization, or hopefulness, or perception, or creativity. We may think of these as talents or skills or inclinations or capacities, but God wants us to think of them as spiritual gifts, to be used for the Common Good, for the Mission of God, for the Way of Love to grow in the world, for the working of miracles that matter. I wonder if you can think of one of your own spiritual gifts?

I want to draw this to a close by telling you a secret. For a long time now, I’ve believed that God intended there to be a third testament to the Bible. If the First Testament was the record of God’s creative work and covenanting with the Hebrew People, and the Second Testament was the record of Jesus expanding that covenant to also include all those called to live his Way of Love, then I’ve long imagined now that there is to be a third testament, to record the way the Holy Spirit empowers people with spiritual gifts to bring healing and wholeness into the world. But this Third Testament, this witness to how the Spirit’s gifts make miracles that matter in the world, might not ever be written down. How could it? There is so much to record – miracles that matter are happening every day when people put God’s spiritual gifts to use for the sake of the world. The people performing them don’t wear robes or perform ritual gestures. They don’t always look particularly holy. Sometimes they don’t even look like miracles at first. Sometimes they look like marchers on Washington braving subzero temperatures to stand up for what is right. Sometimes they look like the guy who salvages the extra food from restaurants at 2 a.m. and brings it to a homeless shelter. Sometimes they look like a SWAT team member who gets a call on her beeper and an hour later is recusing hostages from a synagogue at gunpoint.

This third testament might be a living testament, a testimony, if you will, to what God can accomplish when working through the hearts of those who believe in the transformative power of love. In fact, I think it may be fair to say that you are the Third Testament of the Bible. And those who have come before us. And those who will come after us. You are the miracle of God’s Living Word -- broken, of course, imperfect for sure, firing on not all cylinders most of the time. But nonetheless, you are the incarnation of God’s spiritual gifts you are the ones who can make miracles that matter. Amen.