

-Have you ever missed a joke before and had to have it explained to you? Abby's Grandma Carol has quite a sense of humor being from Queens New York and has many funny statements that have gone down in the family history. But she famously never seems to get a joke that's told by another person, especially by Abby's Uncle Marty who is also quite a jokser. Uncle Marty will make some comment where everyone will laugh and Grandma Carol will say (in a New York accent): "Wait, what? I don't get it." Then someone, usually Abby's Aunt Sue, will explain the joke to Grandma Carol. It really is annoying missing out on a joke, especially when that joke is making fun of you....Ofcourse this never happens to me ever, especially when I am at Men's Breakfast on Wednesdays.....oh no. Never.

-It may or may not surprise you that there are a lot of jokes and social commentaries throughout the entire bible. The Book of Jonah is, perhaps, the most famous "joke" written in the style of an ancient comedy pointing out the hypocrisy of ancient Jews' actions toward their enemy, the Babylonians.

-Today, too, we are in the midst of reading a joke within the Gospel of John. A joke that most contemporary readers pass over. This is to say most of the Jewish leaders and priests of the ancient world would pass over it as well, which is good because it is calling a lot of them out.

-Let's examine this a little bit further. Jesus turning water into wine. This is one of the most famous of all Jesus's signs. It seems even most non-Christians have heard of this one before. But are we REALLY familiar with this story? Pastor and blogger Eric Fister of the Pulpit Fiction Podcast comments: "Reading this story reminds me a lot of what I know in that I don't know a lot about this story." There is this weird exchange between Jesus and his mother, Mary. There is a very non-climactic part of Jesus telling the steward: "just draw the wine out of the jar." (It's like you would expect, after turning water into wine that Jesus would at least bless it or something). Then there is this very humorous (but true) statement of: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." The entire story, to me, puts us a little bit in the shoes of Abby's Grandma Carol saying: "Wait what? I don't get it."

-So what is the point? Jesus likes a good party? Good thing the wine is good?

-I think every biblical story can have, of course, more than one point (which is why we have bible studies). But, the one I want to focus on this morning has much more to do with numbers and jars than it has to do with wine.

-Here is a "pivotal" thing that I tell our Thursday Evening Biblestudy (which ya'll are invited to by the way: next one is at Meg Henderson's house on the 31st at 6:30). That is: the Gospel of John never just "puts numbers into the text willy nilly". Unlike the Gospel of Luke which tends to be a little bit more loose with it's numbering, John always has a very specific point to make. For instance: "On the third day there was a wedding".

For most ancient (and hopefully modern) Christians, this should be a clue. It points to Jesus saying in the next chapter of the Gospel: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will rise it up." For the Gospel of John, this isn't just a wedding party on the 3rd day; this is a resurrection story, a story of new life.

-And then we have this: "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons." Now for us modern readers, we might think: "Jars for purification at a wedding party? Huh, that's weird but whatever." For an ancient Jew, reading this statement would be borderline absurd. These jars were usually placed not at a wedding party, but at the entrance to the Jewish temple where worshipers would wash and clean before presenting themselves for worship. Purification was seen by many in the ancient world as incredibly important: especially Judaism. For after all, not only did Jews make a point of being clean but living as "pure as possible" (for example: eating only certain kinds of meat which was prepared in a very specific way). Jewish leaders in the time of Jesus wrote and spoke about again and again how Judaism represented God's chosen pure people, even in the midst of occupation by the Romans. Then you have something even more weird: there were 6 jars. Why 6?

-6 is a very important number in the ancient world, but not maybe for what you think. 6 was about as unwhole, impure, broken down as you could possibly get. From Pagan mythology to Greek academia, 6 was representative of an un-whole resolution. Infact, we loosely still hold onto this very ancient symbol even today of 6 with the sign of the devil: 666.

-Thus we have the joke: the Jewish leaders, in all of their hype, are not as pure as they think they are. They don't measure up. They fall short. In fact if you didn't get the joke from that, then Jesus makes it doubly clear by doing what in these purification jars? Making them full not with clean water, but WINE! An insult of all insults in many ways. But is this it? Is all Jesus doing here ripping ancient Judaism?

-No. Remember this is a resurrection story too. What makes this a resurrection story, I believe, is a verse that our lectionary cuts off which is unfortunate. The next verse (verse 12) after our gospel story ends today is: "After this Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers and sisters, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days." This isn't just any wedding. This is a wedding where a new "family in faith" is created: a family based not on purity or status liked the warped interpretation of Judaism the leaders of the Temple were proclaiming, but a new way of living....in Christ.

-So what does this story remind us of today? Maybe that we aren't as pure as we think and the wine of new life always needs to be drawn out.

-On August 28th, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the Capitol steps and said: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all people are created equal.'"

-Have we gotten there? Are we living this pure dream? Many people think so. In fact this way of thinking led to the striking down of major portions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and other protections for minorities with one Justice of the Supreme Court writing triumphantly: ""Blatantly discriminatory evasions of federal decrees are rare."

-Just this last week in Bozeman, a message was written on the window of a car owned by an African American resident which said: "We are watching you.....KKK" Another occurred a few days ago in a Missoula grocery store where a teacher at the Missoula International School was handed some soap and told it was perfect for him. "Just keep rinsing until your skin comes off," this person said to the teacher. This teacher is from Venezuela.

-Perhaps the 6 Purification Jars still stand in our world today. The joke is on us.

-On this Martin Luther King Junior Day, I think we, especially in Missoula, need to be reminded that white privilege still reigns in this world and it is easy to forget that. It is easy to forget, due to the size and relative small population of Montana, how our country and society fall quite short of King's dream. We need to have the joke played on us to make us remember this.

-But we also need to remember: the third day. This story isn't here to rip us down completely and leave us out to dry in the cold. It is here to also say: help create a new family. Let us be the movement forward for King's dream to see and treat ALL people, no matter what race they are, as beloved, valued children of God. This is the dream that we fall short of and need Christ in calling us further. This is the dream that if we don't see the joke as on us, we won't get to work. May the powerful and mysterious calling of Christ move us to see our faults and carry us deeper into resurrection and new life.
Amen.