

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
January 14, 2007 ~ John 2: 1-11
Fr. Jim Cook

In the Spirit, in the Moment.

When I was growing up, my family used to watch *The Waltons*, a popular dramatic television series about John and Olivia Walton and their large family. The series follows the family's story through the eyes of John-Boy, the eldest son and an aspiring novelist. John-Boy's dream was to write a great novel that would capture the essential experience of his life. Sometime later in his life, however, John-Boy had what we might call an epiphany: he discovered that the essential experiences of life were best captured, not in one great novel but rather in the vignettes contained within short stories. And here's an important lesson for all of us: that, for us, we can best appreciate life, not when we try to take it in as one grand epic, but rather as a contiguous series of moments.

I think a lot of people look at their spiritual journey in much the same way as John-Boy Walton was trying to look at his life: a search for the big story. And the temptation is to measure our progress, and our spiritual maturity and depth, by looking for that one mountaintop experience. Though this may be a common practice, we risk missing the spiritual moments where real blessing and refreshment and growth occur. A good example comes in today's reading from John's gospel.

Almost every time I read this passage, I think: Wouldn't it be great to include Jesus on the guest list of all our wedding receptions and parties? We'd never have to worry about running out of wine. And he'd probably make the food stretch as well. And I'd be happy if that were the moral of today's gospel reading; and it's not, but we can often fall into the trap of living our lives as if it were. Lawrence Wood, the pastor of Fremont United Methodist Church in Fremont, Michigan, writes this:

No one knows what gift Jesus might have brought to the wedding at Cana, but it could hardly have been more frivolous than the favor his mother asked of him. The wine had run out. "Woman, what is that to us?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." Surely the Son of Man had not come to get the guests liquored up.

But he relented and quietly, miraculously, saved the host from embarrassment. John's account of the wedding has all kinds of eucharistic significance. There is also a homelier dimension to this story, which is that the miracle served as Jesus' wedding gift.

It was the gift of joy, a good time for all. Thanks to Jesus, instead of the host and guests pointing fingers at each other, everyone had a great time. We can imagine the dancing, laughter, camaraderie and delight of the day, as people who had not been together for many years renewed their ties. Guests who otherwise might have had nothing in common had

come together because of the host. In many ways, then, the wedding feast resembled the kingdom of God.

Jesus brought a wonderful gift. It didn't really need to last beyond the wedding, since the best gifts contribute to the day, to the memories of joy, instead of gathering dust in a cabinet or attic. They may not, and likely will not, be material things.

I see too many people looking for God to intervene in their lives in ways that are similar to what we just heard about in today's gospel, in big, dramatic ways. We look for the mountain top experience, we look for the dramatic healing, we look for the life-changing intersections. In short, we look for spiritual reality, and the spiritual touch of God in the big things, in the things we think are important. And when we do, we miss the touch of God in the small things.

In their book, "Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life," Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, talk about ways in which we can learn to see the sacred and the spiritual in the most common of things and experiences. And they begin their book with these words:

Life is a spiritual adventure. Every day we encounter signs that point to the active presence of [the] Spirit in the world around us. Spiritual literacy is the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences.

And then, the Brussats provided a list of examples of experiences in which the participants encountered the presence of the Spirit. Here are a few of them.

- A group of women gets together once a month to take turns answering one question. They share their deepest concerns and the stories of their lives.
- A retired couple comes to the beach every day with their dogs. They carry garbage bags and pick up litter as they walk. They love the beach and make a habit of caring for it.
- A woman teaches in the Sunday school and serves as an officer of the women's group at her church. Through her daily demonstrations of enthusiasm for church work, she inspires others to become involved.
- A young couple has just had their first child and decides to return to the synagogue. They want their boy to relish his ethnic roots and to experience the practice of Judaism.
- A group of therapists gathers on a weekday afternoon to talk about their night dreams, and to do mental imagery exercises as a way of getting in touch with their inner lives.

- A woman in a stressed-filled job attends yoga class every other day. This combination of bodywork and meditation relaxes and revitalizes her.
- A small circle of people meets each month to talk about the story of a movie in relation to the stories of their own lives; they call the process they are going through “soul making.”

The world, and the experiences of our lives, are full of meaning, and we can discover that meaning if we only take the time to look for it.

One day, several years ago, and in a moment of familial spontaneity, and just because we thought it would be fun, my family and I hopped in our car and drove to an artist’s supply show near Westport. There we purchased a fifty-pound box of sculptors’ clay, and a few simple sculpting tools – which probably cost us no more than \$30. Later in the afternoon, we opened the box of clay, and distributed a large chunk to each of the four of us. Laura, Emily and I sat at the kitchen table, and Peggy took a tray-table into the living room. We put on some music, and as each of us worked at our chunks of clay, we talked about different things. At first, I found that I was anxious about how my piece of sculpture would turn out. (Performance anxiety rears its ugly head, again!) But I made myself focus on the process of working the clay, and on how good it felt to mold it and shape it, and was eventually able to give up worrying about how it would turn out. At some point, I had what some might call a small epiphany experience. As I sat before my lump of clay – trying to fashion it into the shape of a dog’s head – I looked at my daughters sitting in front of me, and at my wife clearly visible in the next room, and I heard the music, and I felt the damp clay in my hands, and at that moment, I felt full – full of the Spirit, full of joy, full of peace. It was a small moment, and it passed quickly as I returned my attention to the clay in front of me. But in that moment, because I was able to focus on that moment, it became clear to me that God was near me, that God wanted me to have joy in life, and that – setting aside for a little while, all the worries and cares of my life – renewal and refreshment were possible ... in the moment.

I think that it’s fine to hope for the big things in life from God. It’s fine to hope for relief when we’re burdened. It’s fine to hope for wealth when we’re poor. It’s fine to hope for health when we’re sick. It’s fine to hold out hope for God to intervene in our lives, and to save us in big ways – like Jesus did at that wedding in Cana of Galilee. But as we await those big interventions, let us not forget that, in the midst of our burdens, in the midst of our poverty, and in the midst of our sickness, God still comes to us in the small things, in the moments of our time. And in those moments, small though they may be, and as brief as they may be, the Spirit of God is there, waiting for us to see and recognize him, and to receive from him, refreshment, and renewal, and strength.

Amen.