

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
16<sup>th</sup> January 2022

John 2:1-21

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*An Imperfect Jesus*

**O**n my laptop at home, I have a spreadsheet full of several pages' worth of figures about the cost of opening and running a brewery. Brewing beer has been a hobby of mine for nearly 20 years, and around 8 years or so ago, I was ready to leave ministry and look for another career.

That was around the time my dad died, and it was also a difficult year of upheaval at the church I was pastoring. But those major events along with a lot of smaller things left me questioning my faith and led me on a path of giving up on a lot of

aspects of Christianity that had been a core part of my understanding for the previous two decades.

A very wise friend and colleague made the comment to me that growing faith often feels like losing faith, and I think he was right about that. But at the time, I found myself unable to believe anymore in what I'll call the supernatural Jesus—a Jesus whose power comes from making magic happen, a Jesus who can defy the laws of the natural universe and do things the rest of us, the rest of humanity, could not.

For me, that was a Jesus

that made Christianity easier because it was a Jesus who could fix everything broken in my life and in the world. Sure, none of that had happened yet, but eventually it would. Someday Jesus would come back and do everything for us.

It's easy to see how such an image of Jesus gets formed. If we read the gospels uncritically, we can see a Jesus who is unwavering, who never falters, who has an answer to every question and a miracle for every problem.

It's a Jesus that the Church has historically embraced, too. The book of Hebrews claims that Jesus was like us in every way except that he never sinned. He never screwed up. He never made a single mistake in life or did anything wrong or regrettable.

But that's not an image of Jesus that works for me

anymore. And it hasn't for many years now. It doesn't work because it makes Jesus out to be something other than human. Which is not a statement about Jesus' divinity. I think we err when we confuse divinity with human perfection or infallibility.

Our reading this morning from John 2 gives us a couple of stories of Jesus. And it's certainly possible to read these stories and see the miracle worker Jesus – the one who turns water into wine. And let me tell you, that kind of talent would make a brewery business a whole lot more feasible.

But I think if we pay attention to these two stories, we can also see a Jesus who is human, who sometimes says the wrong thing, who sometimes loses his temper and gets angry, especially when he sees the exploitation of the poor or vulnerable at the hands of the

wealthy and powerful.

In the Jewish tradition there's a practice called midrash. It's been around at least since the time of Jesus. And the idea is that as the scriptures were read, the rabbis would engage their imaginations and fill in the blanks of the stories. Add in the missing details.

So a midrash on these stories might remind us that the same Jesus who turned water into wine also spoke curtly and dismissively toward his mother when she asked him to help out during the wedding, who got perhaps a little too angry when he encountered money changers at the temple.

This is the kind of Jesus who gets tired and frustrated. The kind of Jesus who had rough skin and weathered hands, maybe had acne as a teenager, lines around his eyes, a prematurely receding hairline. In other

words, a human Jesus. Not a Jesus washed clean of all his messy humanity, like an Aesop's fable.

The danger in a Jesus who is too perfect is that Jesus then becomes defined by this unattainable divinity. The things that make Jesus special are the things that make him different from the rest of humanity, set apart from the rest of us. But that's not a humanity created in God's image. That's a Jesus created in God's image who doesn't have to deal with all the messy parts of humanity.

And it's not the Jesus we find in the gospels. At least not the only Jesus. John begins this story by pointing out that it's Jesus' first miracle. Really, it's the first thing Jesus does at all after he starts his ministry. It's right here in the second chapter, right at the outset, and the first thing Jesus does is to

break the fifth commandment.

Now I know you're all sitting there counting on your fingers... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... no other gods before me, remember the sabbath, something about stealing and adultery and coveting are in there, too, I think. Number five is the one about honoring your father and mother. Does Jesus' retort to his mom of, "woman, what does that have to do with me?" sound like honoring his dear mother? I'm trying to think of a nice way to say those words.

Now, he does go on to create some very fine wine so the wedding party can keep going. It's a miracle of abundance amid scarcity, and it sets the tone for the next story where Jesus loses his temper over the greed on display outside the temple.

So, John gives us this messy juxtaposition of a

human Jesus and a miracle worker, an imperfect person who does amazing things. This is a Jesus who proves once again that our purity culture, where something good can't come from you unless you are pure and right within the rules of society, that idea is shown for the rubbish it is.

Remember last Sunday when we read the previous chapter and Nathaniel, one of the potential disciples, was skeptical of following Jesus. "What good could possibly come from Nazareth?" he asks. Everyone knows that if you want a real savior, a real messiah, you have to get someone with the right pedigree. Not from some trash town like Nazareth. You need someone who is unblemished, who has no mistakes in their past, who looks the part.

In the past 3 years, I've seen colleagues lose their

jobs as ministers, and in one case, lose their ordination, over sexual infidelity, drug use, and a DUI. I'm not condoning those behaviors at all. But I think it's worth considering if our ability to see the divinity in someone else, or in ourselves, depends on living up to some ideal of perfection or purity.

I remember how disillusioned I was when I learned that Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life and good work we celebrate this weekend, had numerous extramarital affairs. Or Mother Teresa, who made a tremendous positive impact in some of the more destitute places in Calcutta, also was known to be abusive toward some of the sisters who worked with her and to have befriended known perpetrators of genocides in order to solicit donations and fund her work.

I think the humanity and imperfection of Jesus and of

others can challenge our notions of divinity no matter where we fall on the theological spectrum. In progressive Christianity, we've pushed back against the idea that a full expression of human sexuality, for example, somehow diminishes our embodiment of the divine. But on the other side of the theological aisle, I have to confess that I bristle at the idea of seeing the divinity in someone wearing a MAGA hat.

An imperfect Jesus invites all of us to see the divinity in ourselves and in one another. Here's a portrayal of an imperfect Jesus who does wonderful things. And I think that's an image we desperately need for ourselves and for others so that we, too, can see past our own imperfections and the failures and sins of others to the divinity that is within all of us.

If we keep believing that nothing good can come out of Nazareth, that nothing good can come from us because we've messed up, then we have missed the point of the gospel.

When we take the humanity out of Jesus, then our connection to the sacred is severed. To the point where it is taken away from us, placed outside of us, made to be something other than us. If Jesus' sacredness, if his divinity means that he has no connection with our experience of humanity, then what does that say about us?

When I started the journey of my own transformation of faith, it began with giving up on the idea of a storybook, fairytale Jesus. A Jesus who was something other than human. It felt a lot like losing faith. But growing faith often feels like losing faith. French phi-

losopher Paul Ricœur calls this transition a "second naïveté."

We give up on the naïve, storybook faith of our childhood that depends on some ideal of perfection, of flawlessness, for God. But Ricœur suggests that childhood faith can be replaced by something deeper and much more fulfilling—a faith that the divine exists in the imperfect.

This is a place where I think Christianity has diverged from the path of Jesus. The predominant expression of Christianity now seems to be about believing the right thing and condemning a particular set of behaviors. The path of Jesus, I think, is different.

The gospels depict a Jesus who saw divinity in everyone—including prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, foreigners, and enemies. That Jesus not only saw the

divinity in everyone, he joined with such “sinners” to create the kin-dom of God. Our world needs fewer Christians, and more people committed to following an imperfect Jesus. I’m glad to be a part of a church that’s much more interested in the latter. It’s the primary thing that keeps my faith alive. Blessed be.

Amen.

