



February 22 – Down in the Valley

There is a scene from the 1980 movie “Stir Crazy” stuck in my head. It depicts the story of two gentlemen, played by Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder, who are wrongly arrested for robbery. While in prison, there is a character named Grossberger, who frightens the other inmates. He is a large bald man who was an Olympic level heavyweight wrestler. One night as they are all trying to fall asleep, you hear this shockingly beautiful rendition of “Down in the Valley” as Grossberger sings to calm himself. It is beautiful and absolutely takes you by surprise. There is something memorable in those beautiful surprises in life.

This text portrays such a story. The surprise of it all catches us off guard. Even knowing the story, it still catches us a bit by surprise. Imagine those who were gathered at this wedding at Cana in Galilee. The setting is likely a relative of Jesus, even a very close relative. This is seen in the fact that Jesus and his disciples are there. It is also shown in the fact that Mary is aware of the approaching embarrassment when the wine runs out. The host family would have been responsible for this.

It is almost comedic as Mary approaches Jesus. It gives you a bit of a glimpse into some of the family dynamics. There is a little bit of a back and forth between Mary and Jesus. I agree that it can be read several different ways from harsh to playful. The exact tone we will never know. What we do know is that Mary knows Jesus well. She does the type of thing that only a parent can pull off, as she turns to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Mary, the woman who was visited by the angel Gabriel. The one who sang the Magnificat and looked toward the time when all would be seen as equal. The person who took the words of the shepherds and magi and kept them in her heart, is now the one who gives Jesus the prompt to get to work.

With that prompt, the ministry of Jesus begins. As we continue this early stage of the Lenten journey, let us take notice of the way this ministry begins. We often focus on the social justice aspects of Jesus’ ministry, or the healings, the sermons, and all of the other things that Jesus does. That is not where this journey begins. It begins with Jesus working a miracle that surprises everyone. Jesus takes a good wedding celebration and makes it better.

That is not the type of news we expect to hear on the First Sunday in Lent. We come in expecting the story of Jesus starving in the wilderness after the Spirit shoves him there after baptism. We expect wilderness and discipline. We expect to hear about how the giving up of chocolate, or sugar, is a good thing that aligns us with the journey of Jesus. We expect something that feels like that Stir Crazy jail cell, paying our dues, and fearful of tomorrow. Then this story bursts in. The beauty and message are surprising. We are reminded that the Good News is so good, it catches us by surprise.

“Down in the valley, the valley so low. Hang your head over, hear the wind blow. Hear the wind blow, love, hear the wind blow, hang your head over. Hear the wind blow. Roses love sunshine. Violets love dew. Angels in heaven know I love you.” There are times when we feel overwhelmed and we are not sure what is next. Much like those in the movie, wondering if there was any sort of a future at all.

May that good news break into our hearts and surprise us. May we hear that wind, that spirit, blowing into our hearts, reminding us that God loves us, that we are invited and loved. Today, we come in expecting repentance, feeling guilty, and begging for forgiveness. Here, in this space, God welcomes us to a wedding feast, a celebration of the love that God has for all of humanity. That is good news indeed. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt