

I've been seeing flocks of birds flying together everywhere lately. I will be sitting in traffic, and I'll see a cluster of dark birds flying in a mass overhead. They will fly in one direction, and then—in a moment—with some sort of communication we don't understand--they will all change direction.

It seems to be happening to me when I am frowning and preoccupied—trying to figure out the answer to something that's bothering me. Then I look up, see the birds flying together, like a ballet where everyone is participating in the same dance, and for some reason I can't explain even to myself, suddenly I feel happy and my problems seem trivial.

It's been getting more extravagant too. Just the other day I saw a huge flock. This flock was so big that when it flew, it was like a giant black mass of birds that took up most of the intersection in the air above us. They would fly west, then suddenly turn and fly north.

I noticed a couple of large groups begin to fly in different directions. They would do their dance in the air—as separate groups of birds. One group flew over my car and then south towards the church, another swooped around and settled in a large tree. A third went west and I lost sight of them.

They certainly could see *each other* from their perspective in the air—but I was grounded and couldn't see them all. I knew that all those separate bird groups that I couldn't see anymore would eventually get back together—and then the flying would be spectacular.

I realized I grinning like an idiot, my eyes were filled with tears- and I was brimming to overflowing with joy—it was so weird. And wonderful.

I glanced at the people in the car next to me, and they were looking at me like I was insane.

But there was something going on here. I've seen birds do this my whole life, but I've never felt this sense of stepping out of time-- this peace and joy whenever I see them lately.

At first, I thought it was God giving me something cool and beautiful to distract me from my tendency to be preoccupied with my own thoughts—or angry at the other drivers. But now I'm thinking God is trying to teach me something.

In the Gospel reading this morning we are treated to John's story about the wedding in Cana. Many people take this story at face value: this is a homey story about a wedding. They love this simple tale about Jesus demonstrating that community is good and wine is even better.

180 gallons of it, according to this story. That's a lot of wine for a group of guests who have already been drinking all day...But I think there's probably more to the story than just community building through alcohol.

There are many scholars and people of faith who believe John's gospel is predominantly a work of theology, rather than a book of history. In other words, they believe this book was written to show who Jesus *was*, not just what Jesus *did*.

So is this a story about community and hospitality--- or-- a metaphorical theological statement of who Christ was...I don't think they are mutually exclusive--perhaps it was a little of both.

So here we have a story some say is a miracle. But the author himself doesn't call this water into wine story a miracle. John calls this event a sign. So IF this event conveys a *meaning*--- what might it be?

That is the question John wants us to ask: What does Jesus' turning water into wine mean to us? If John's gospel was used to train catechumens for baptism—as many think-- we need to understand that the details in the story are not there just for color. So let's look at the story:

Jesus turns water into wine- but not just any water. Jesus didn't turn a lake of water into wine, or a cask, or even a well. He used large jars. And not just any jars: jars that held water for the ritual of purification.

The waters of purification set the Jews apart from the rest of the unclean Gentiles—Jews felt that ritual cleansing made them *pure*. The people who, by law, needed this purification were: females once a month and after the birth of a child, anyone was ill, infertile women. These people were deemed “impure”. This water was also used for people who were defiled: men after divorce (women were usually cast out, or considered permanently unclean), women after sexual assault or anyone after life-changing events.

This ritual cleansing was **not** done so that the person *washing* could symbolically rid themselves of their own illness or femaleness or horror. Let me be clear: this cleansing was done to make sure the person washing didn't contaminate others with their femaleness, their illness or their horror.

The purpose of the water of purification was to set the unclean apart from the clean. This water determined who was pure enough to mingle in society, and who was not.

Contrast this to wine.

The purpose of both weddings and wine is to bring people together in love and laughter and community. Wine breaks down barriers, love builds bridges, communities bring people together.

Could the water into wine be a sign be that we need to concentrate not on the things that separate us, but the things that bring us together? What a sign of the coming of the Kingdom that would be.

Are we to understand that Jesus changes water into wine to demonstrate that it's not our differences that are the most important thing, it's what unites us: love, community-- *including all*-- rather than separating people into clean and unclean. The water of purification is transformed into the wine of the Spirit.

So what was God showing me through the birds? Perhaps God showed me them flying, changing direction, swooping and diving- all with the sheer joy and wonder of doing it together. No outsiders, all considered part of one larger whole. The theology behind this story seems to be that ours is a story of potential: The potential to break down the barriers that separate us, to form a community united, and working together in love.

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