

Stuck

*By the Very Rev. James G. Munroe
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Almighty God, we beseech you to not answer our prayer for more faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I want to describe a scene. Then I want to ask you to put the scene on hold until the end of the sermon.

The scene is a farmer's field in Montgomery County, Kentucky. It's the middle of the night, and a car is parked in the field. A man sits behind the wheel. He's drenched in perspiration. And he has a pistol in his hand.

The man's name is Whit Criswell. Whit is in his late thirties, he's a successful banker, he's a popular civic leader, he's a loving husband, and he's a doting father of two children.

Unbeknownst to his wife, children, colleagues and friends, he is also an out-of-control sports gambler. His addiction to gambling is so overwhelming, that he has embezzled \$200,000 from his own bank to try to pay back some bookies.

Now, in the early morning hours of May 10, 1984, Whit Criswell has come to the end. He sits in his car in that field, pistol in hand, knowing that there is no way out.

That's the scene. Please keep it in your mind's eye for just a few minutes, as we turn now to look at today's gospel (John 2:1-11). And I want to ask you to do something a little difficult, because we need to switch from the despair of that scene in the field, to the humor of the story in today's gospel.

Now, I understand that God and humor is not a very common theme. We're okay with God feeling compassion. We're okay with God feeling sorrow. We're sort of okay with God feeling anger. But to think of God smiling, or chuckling, or cracking up – to think of Jesus grinning, tears running down his cheeks, holding his stomach because he hasn't heard one that good in a while... well, I think Jesus smiled and laughed. As the author Max Lucado puts it, "I think he smiled and laughed a little at people and a lot with people."

And especially in today's gospel. The scene is a wedding. It takes place in Cana, which is a small village about three miles from Nazareth. Jesus and his new disciples and his mother have all walked over to Cana for the party.

Right away, Jesus and his mother have a wonderful moment. You see, the caterer didn't get an accurate count of the guests, and now they're out of wine. Mary comes to her son to tell him about this problem. Why? Because she knows that this is no ordinary son, she's proud of him, and she wants to show him off by having him fix the problem.

What does Jesus say to her? "Mom, please. Don't make a scene." (A loose but accurate translation) And how does Mary respond? It's classic. She ignores Jesus. She calls to the waiters. "It's okay! My son says he'll fix everything!"

You know the rest of the story. Jesus performs his first miracle. He takes water in some stone bottles and turns it into wine. And we're not talking about a couple of bottles. He makes over one hundred and twenty gallons of wine. Then the headwaiter tastes this new wine, and he gets mad. He says to the groom, "You're supposed to serve the good wine first while we're all still sober and can enjoy the taste. But now that we're all a little tipsy, you pull out the \$30 a bottle stuff."

That line in this story always makes me think of our former bishop, Bob Denis, who died of cancer eleven years ago. Bob was once asked how his life had changed, after he was stricken with cancer. Bob replied, "Well, among other things, I don't buy cheap wine anymore."

And now, as this story of the wedding at Cana comes to an end, there's Jesus, standing off to one side, with a lovely smile on his face, right at this incredible moment in which he takes his first step in going public – his first step in telling the world that the Word has become flesh.

I want to bring this experience home. I want this story about Jesus to connect with our own experience. And in order to do this, I need to say two things.

First, miracles are the bottom line for what it means to be a Christian. Miracles are the sum and substance, the woof and warp of having a relationship with God. Miracles are not the exception in the Kingdom of God – they are the norm.

Second, the core miracle that informs our life in Christ is the experience of a change in human nature. Changing water into wine? A snap. Curing leprosy? Piece of cake. But a turning around in some basic aspect of how we think and feel and speak and act? There's the miracle that makes God real.

Let me give you an example of why this is such a miracle. Because we're talking about weddings, I want to describe a phone call I had some time ago. I was speaking to a friend who lives in another city. She said,

I knew when I walked down the aisle and saw him at the front of the church that it wasn't going to work. But I kept walking. My mother told me not to marry him. My sister said it wouldn't work. But I prayed that he'd change. I prayed that I'd change. I prayed that I'd wake up one morning, and it would all be different. And now I'm stuck. I need more faith.

You see what I'm saying? We ache to be able to turn around in some basic area in how we think and feel and act. We yearn to get unstuck. And we think it's got to do with mustering up more faith. My friend on the phone cried out for more faith.

And the miracle happens when we realize that this prayer will not be answered. The miracle comes when our own efforts fail in jacking up our own faith. Because it is in the midst of our failure, that we are encountered by a God whom we can trust. The trustworthiness of the love of God turns us around, as our own efforts to do so simple collapse.

That the miracle. We find that we can trust God. And why? Because at one particular point in history, in a little backwater province of the Roman Empire, in the little towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth and Cana, God stepped into the world to reveal himself as trustworthy.

Sitting alone in his car in that farmer's field, pistol in hand, Whit Criswell had failed, failed through his own strength to get free of his addiction. He was stuck. Earlier that evening, he left a note on his wife's dresser. It said,

Sandra, my dear, dear wife, thank you for loving and trusting me all these years, but I must go now. There is no hope. I have committed illegal acts at the bank, and I am finished. I have lied and shamed you, my family, my friends and my God. Tell Chad and Whitney they were God's gifts to me. But Dad has done something terribly wrong, and I must go now.

Sitting in that farmer's field, Whit made a plan. He would fire a practice shot through the window – and then swing the pistol back and pull the trigger again. The blast of the first shot shattered the window. And the voice in his head said, “Do it. Pull the trigger. This is what you deserve.”

But then, there was another voice, a voice that quietly said, “Trust me.”

The first voice burst in with, “Do it!” And the other voice repeated, “Trust me.”

“Just get it over with!” “Trust me.”

When the sun finally came up, Whit put the pistol down and drove home. His wife had found the note and called the police. She embraced him, the officers handcuffed him, and he was led away. He was led away a broken man...

... and also taking his very first steps in becoming free. Because as he gave up trying to make it on his own, he began to lean on the trustworthiness of the love of God.

There were lots of hard days ahead – but Whit would never be the same. One evening, about three months into his incarceration, Whit found himself reading Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you, Whit – plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope, Whit, and a future.”

When Whit got out of prison, he began to volunteer at a local church. Over the years he became more and more involved, until finally he was added to the staff of the church as one of the pastors. In 1998, another area church asked him to serve as their senior pastor. Today, that church is booming.

And now, whenever Whit tells his story, he says this – “You can't go back and make a brand new start. You can start today and make a brand new ending.”

What Whit has learned is that his own life, and the life of his church, are founded not on his own strength – but on the one who was smiling as he worked that first miracle at a wedding in Cana – and who smiled again as he worked another miracle in farmer's field in Montgomery County, Kentucky – and who smiles again today, smiles that incredible smile on those who are stuck, and who cry out, and who are met by our trustworthy God.

Where are you stuck?

Amen.