

Pastor's Message – 1/16/2022
John 2:1-11

In a miracle story found only in John's gospel, Jesus begins His public ministry at a very public event: a wedding in Cana of Galilee. His disciples are with Him, as well as his mother. The story begins simply enough, and there is no hint in the first few verses that a miracle is about to occur. Suddenly, "the wine supply ran out . . ." (vs. 3). Luckily, "Standing nearby were six stone water jars . . . Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons (vs. 6).

Were you aware that bathing was especially important to Judaism? One of the ritual requirements for observant Jews was to take a bath in a prescribed manner before coming into the synagogue, or in preparation for any holy day. For any good and righteous practitioner of Judaism, cleanliness was literally next to Godliness. Not only did people take full baths, but because it was so dry and dusty, and because people mostly walked from place to place, the first thing they would do when they entered the house was to wash their faces and hands. Then they would remove their sandals and wash their feet. Living in that dry and dusty land, I can imagine people were glad to take baths and grateful for water.

So why should we be spending all this time thinking about water and baths? Well, because the story about Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana starts not with wine, but with water. In verse six John writes, "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty to thirty gallons." Note also that a few verses back John tells us that Jesus and his disciples were invited to a wedding **on the third day**. Why might that detail be important?

Because in Jesus' day, as part of the marriage ritual, a feast proceeded the ceremony itself. The marriage feast typically lasted seven days, with new guests arriving each day. Usually, when a new guest arrived, after walking in from the dusty road, the first thing the guest did was wash his or her hands and feet. The second thing the guest would do was sit down to be served some food and wine. Wine and food flowed freely at these festivals. Sometimes supplies ran short. That seems to have been the case when Jesus and his disciples arrived on the third day of the festivities. Could it be that Jesus and his disciples used up the last of the bath water in those six stone water jars? I wonder about that, since John tells us no sooner had they gotten themselves cleaned up and seated for the meal when the wine ran out too.

So, Jesus asked the servants to refill the jars. Naturally, they must have thought they were being asked to replenish the water for bathing. But to their surprise, Jesus told them to fill their empty wine jugs from the water jars, and then to take them to the chief steward for a tasting.

Of course, the steward didn't know where the servants had gotten the wine in their wine jugs. But when he tasted it, he knew for certain that it was the best wine that had been served for the entire feast! Perhaps what remained in the water jars was still water. Perhaps only what was drawn into the wine jugs in the presence of Jesus was changed into

wine as God commanded it to be. That is who Jesus was, after all. Jesus was God's command spoken in and through a flesh-and-blood human being.

What Jesus did at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee was not completely about turning water into wine. What it was about was a clear demonstration of who he always was from the beginning to the end of time: Emmanuel, God with us, the Word of God made flesh. We need not get caught up in the simple miracle of water being changed into wine by Jesus. After all, life itself is a much greater miracle, is it not?

The big problem that we have today, with our electric lights and our hot and cold running water, and our bath tubs and hot tubs and showers and flush toilets and automatic clothes washers and dishwashers and central heat and air conditioning and refrigerators and ovens and smart phones and televisions and computers and electronic gadgets and games is that we are so surrounded by all of these modern luxury items that we forget that life itself is nothing less than an absolute miracle spoken by God.

Maybe we have become so accustomed to the wonders of the modern world that what God did in Jesus and what God did in Cana of Galilee no longer strikes us with wonder. Maybe the miracle of life itself no longer strikes us with wonder. But the Gospel of John reminds us that life itself is a wonder and a miracle.

John also says that there is a proper and true way that life is meant to be lived, and in fact, that Jesus is that way, and that truth, and that life itself. This means that Jesus' life is the standard by which the lives of all disciples are measured. According to Jesus, life does not consist of how many luxuries, like hot and cold running water, we are surrounded with. In Christ, life consists of looking and listening for God as long as we live, seeking to live as disciples of Jesus and holding our fellow human beings in the highest regard, second only to our awe for God who spoke this world and our lives into being.

But back to the water jars . . . John purposely tells us that Jesus filled six stone jars, typically used for the Jewish rites of purification, with the water he changed into an abundance of wine. This is no insignificant detail. The jar would normally be used for the washing of hands and utensils, meeting the need for constant cleanliness as the law required. By transforming the water of these jars into wine for the party, Jesus is sending a message that the blessings he brings would meet the deepest of needs. He was sending a message that at his party the wine of his truth would do more than gladden the heart and redden the cheeks, it would do and give the things of God. It would bring purity, providence and so much more. Those who drink from him would not simply feel rich for a week but would be rich and whole in the things of God for eternity!

In Jesus there is no such thing as poor. There is an abundance of the things that matter for those who have been baptized into his promises and cling to his cross. You want a party of people with whom you can let your hair down? You've got the family of faith.

You want riches? Through the turning of the water into wine, Jesus is revealed. This miracle speaks of God bringing extravagance and abundance into everyday activities. God's glory is revealed, and the disciples believe in Jesus. The world – or at least the world of this wedding party – has been turned around.

What is truly amazing in this story today is the abundance of wine Jesus offers the wedding party. Maybe it was all the wine in all the jars? Imagine about 150 gallons of wine and the highest quality! Jesus provides the best wine at the end of the feast. This would have been unheard of in that time – a reversal of expectations.

In John 2:1-11, we hear how Jesus gave more than people expected. Can you think of a time when you experienced God giving more than you expected: the 100-fold harvest rather than just breaking even? Can you think of a time when you realized that water had been turned into wine in your life? What does this tell you about God's abundance? What does all this mean to us?

There are some Christians who would be hard-pressed to identify a precise time or place when the water of their lives was turned into wine. Nor is the transformation always as sudden or as complete as in our story today.

What we need to do is to open our heart and mind to the presence of God among us. What we need to do as His disciples is study the ways of Jesus more. What we need to do is make our lives about practicing discipleship. What we need to do is to learn to be grateful again: grateful to God for life, and grateful to Jesus for teaching us the way to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. What we need to do is practice being grateful.

How can we do that? What practices can we take on to remind us to be grateful? Can we give thanks for the water each morning when we take a bath or a shower or draw water for your coffee or the water you use to brush your teeth? Can we give thanks for the rain that falls to water the earth? Can we give thanks for the snow that blankets the earth now, but will melt in spring to leave moisture in the soil?

Can we give thanks to God for speaking this world into being, and for separating the day from the night and the earth from the sea? Can we give thanks for Jesus for being our ultimate luxury, God's crowning gift, and be filled with gratitude for the miracle of his saving love?

How do you respond to the fact, presented in the story of the wedding at Cana, that God likes to celebrate and invites us to do the same? What kind of party is God inviting you to?

Later in John's gospel, Jesus would make this beautiful statement regarding the reason for his arrival and the purpose of his ministry. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus came and crashed the party so that we might live richly, joyfully, hopefully, and abundantly. Have you been doing that lately? Have you been walking around as if you're headed to a funeral? Have you been buried in worry, stress, and shortsighted fears? If so, why?

We are invited to join the rejoicing. Jesus changes water to wine to make the party livelier! So, pay particular attention to your spirit of rejoicing in worship today. Exult in God and God's goodness and care for us. Don't just sing about God. Actually rejoice! And don't just use words to do this. Let your bodies and faces show you're really doing it.

We are invited to join with Jesus. His disciples had already trusted Jesus enough to start following him. But what happens at this wedding seals the deal for them. Now they're not just "along for the journey." Now they're "all in."

Note who's all in. It's not the wedding guests. It's the disciples. The guests are happy. The disciples are now committed.

Sometimes the church seems to think it has run out of wine to offer. Sometimes it's us as individuals who think that we have nothing left or nothing to give. But God's wine never runs out. In fact, according to John, the best is yet to come.

The story of Jesus' turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana means that if Jesus can change water into wine, he can change us, too. This is a miracle of transformation. Jesus can turn the sour into the sweet. Jesus can turn bitterness into peace. Jesus can turn hatred into love. Jesus can turn anger into joy.

One other thing about the story that jumped out at me is that hardly anyone even knows that a miracle has been performed. So how do we tell people, how do we celebrate the miracles that happen even today and the gifts that we receive even today? What are some of the gifts of God with which God has blessed you? What or who are the gifts in this Church? Which ones shine out and how do they get used, shared, and celebrated?

If we are "all in," we are called to share what we have been given, to join the party and celebrate God's abundance in our lives and to tell about it. If your neighbor needed a cup of sugar, you would give it to her, right? But what if she needed a friend? If your neighbor needed bread, you would share it with her, right? But what if she needed love? If your neighbor needed their driveway plowed or a ride to the doctor, you'd provide that, right? But what if he needed compassion? If your neighbor's water pipe broke and they needed a hose run from your house, you'd do that, right? But what if they needed God?

We can depend on God's abundant love. If Jesus can change water into wine at the wedding at Cana, He can certainly change the normal, everyday things of our lives into amazing and extravagant gifts.

Last week I focused on what it means to be named as one of God's beloved and special children. This week, we focus on what miracles, even the small miracles, which reveal God with us. Then and now, there are gifts all around us, given to each follower of Jesus, gifts of many, many kinds. We have what we need to build up our community and accomplish God's mission for us thanks to the generous and diverse distribution of gifts among us by the Spirit.

So today is a day to celebrate and give thanks for God's generous and diverse gifts, as well as, perhaps, look around for places where we're not yet recognizing just how generously and diversely God has gifted us, each, and all. The abundant gifts of God are at work in the community, in our families, in our work, at school and everywhere we live to reveal Christ right in our midst. Today is a day to look around and notice where Jesus turns water into wine.