

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

'Beyond Expectation'

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John 2: 1-11

2On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' ⁴And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' ⁵His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' ⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

At the beginning of each wedding service at which I officiate, I mention that Jesus attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee and that he brought with him a spirit of celebration and joy, a spirit described in the reading from the gospel of John in which he changes water into wine. It has been a season of weddings here at Meadowbrook Congregational Church. Three of the young women who grew up in this church were married here in September. Because they happened to be women and we happen to be the parents of two young women, during these weddings Laura and I looked into the future a bit. We looked into that future with a bit of anticipation and a great deal of trepidation.

A colleague of mine has mentioned to me that his daughter has become engaged to be married. As the future father of the bride he seems very proud and excited. But then he added that as part of the wedding preparations, his family was obtaining some estimates of reception costs from various banquet halls. The quotes he said, took his breath away. When he told me this I bit my tongue thinking of all the times that I had jokingly said I was glad I had two girls instead of two boys. Anyway, my colleague reflected upon his situation from the perspective of the miracle described in Scripture today saying, "With everything for the wedding costing so much, where is Jesus when I really need him?"

The gospel of John, the source of today's Scripture lesson, is really a book of signs. John describes actions of Jesus that are something more than they appear to be. They are miracles, but the significance of the miracle did not rest solely in the details of the action. Instead there was something greater to which it pointed. Jesus did what he did to direct people to the power of God. In other words, this story about Jesus changing water into wine is something more than a little fun at the wedding reception. It is proof of the glory of God breaking through in the midst of life through the actions of Jesus.

C.S. Lewis writes that the purpose of miracles was so that we might witness the wonderful work of God at a more noticeable speed, on a more conceivable scale. It is as if we are viewing time lapse photography of a plant growing or a flower coming to full bloom. Lewis

writes, "Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the same story that is written across the whole world in letter too large for some of us to see." He adds that miracles are God doing locally that which God has done and will do universally. Thus, miracles are best referred to as "signs," reminders of what God is always doing.

So what is the sign at the miracle at Cana? It appears to be a miracle short of landmark importance. No one was healed. No one was fed. David Friedrich Strauss calls this "a luxury miracle." It really didn't help people in need. All Jesus did was make a few gallons of wine to keep a wedding reception going. Places in Napa Valley and western Michigan do that every day. I recall my father-in-law telling the bartender to keep things pouring and flowing at our wedding reception for an extra hour because everyone was having a good time. He just hated to see it end. But I didn't see a divine sign in all of it. Why would the author of John talk about this particular miracle, this sign, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry?

Consider for a moment what was happening in the story. Weddings are something special for those getting married and for the families affected. But in reality, they are pretty routine. People get married every day. Just about everybody has been to a wedding. So Jesus was at a place where anyone **could** be and **would** be found. This was an ordinary stage for the universal truth of God to be revealed. That was part of the sign-God's power in action anywhere, at any time.

Now there are other symbols hiding within the details of this story. The large clay pots that carried the water were used for the purification ceremony of the Hebrew people. They represented the ritual by which the people had previously come to understand and know and expect God. Those pots represented familiar established practice and tradition. They also represented limited and rational faith, reasonable and conventional expectations. In many ways the tradition and the ritual of centuries had become the object of worship for the Hebrew people of Jesus' time. Comfortable habit defined the limits of people's hopes. They were satisfied if the power of God was just plain adequate. Those at the wedding knew nothing but the comfort of the bland wine and the old jars. They did not understand that they stood on the edge of a new age.

I recall the story of a young man who had recently completed his course in First Aid certification. He was previously put off at the sight of even a drop of blood and wanted to overcome that fear. Soon after he successfully finished the class, he came upon an accident. There were people hurt, a couple of them bleeding badly. The young man went into action. Later he told his mother about the event. He said, "Before I went to First Aid class, I would have fainted or run away. But now I knew what to do. I sat on the curb; put my head between my legs so I would not faint. I was so proud of myself." Of course nothing had changed. The young man failed to realize that his knowledge was supposed to be applied in a way that made his experience meaningful.

In the same manner we might miss the significance of the sign of Jesus' miracle. We might overlook the power of God's presence brought into our lives. We might fail to use that which we have been given to seek new life in our work and relationships and to use our gifts for purposes greater than our own desires.

But Jesus opened the door to a new age of possibility. Suddenly, from those very same jars of limited expectation, new wine was served. In Jesus, the good stuff of God is always being poured out right now. The good news of vibrant possibility comes into our midst right here and now. When Jesus is present and celebrated, the results are more than we can expect and even more than we can imagine! Henri Nouwen writes, "Jesus calls us to live in the ex-static place." We are to live away from the old, tired, worn places where nothing new can break forth. If we don't expect anything new to happen, life gets flat and dull and loses vitality.

Rev. Edward Markquart tells a story about a long time member of his congregation named Al. During a visit to Al's home Markquart noticed some apples on the kitchen table and the conversation turned to apples, apple recipes, and cider. Al invited the minister to have a

glass of his special cider. He went to the refrigerator and took out an old jug that said "vinegar." He took down a couple of champagne glasses, glasses seemingly much too fancy for cider, and poured the apple cider into them. Al reminded his minister that his birthday was a few days before and said that they would be drinking to toast his birthday. They drank the cider together. Markquart said that with his first sip his eyes popped. His taste buds exploded. It wasn't apple cider. It was apple champagne- fresh and sharp and full of life. Al laughed and his eyes twinkled. This just was not ordinary stuff that he was serving to his guest. This was something new and full of life and promise.

Now you might say, "Art, I thought this was supposed to be a stewardship sermon." And it can be. There is a lesson here about the attitude in which we offer our gifts. There is a lesson here about how our church community can use the gifts of its people. The stewardship lesson from the gospel of John teaches us that life with Jesus is always about more, not about less. There is no need that can exhaust the grace of God. The lesson of the miracle at Cana is that Jesus can dramatically transform the everyday and the commonplace and the powerless into something lasting, extraordinary, and powerful. When Jesus shows up at a wedding or within a church fellowship, things are different. Life with Jesus is always about what can be possible- not what used to be done. Life with Jesus is about what we participate in and engage it with all of our hopes and dreams- not what we don't do or cannot do because of previous failure. Life with Jesus is about transformation, about how we can be changed and experience a new quality of life when our faith is linked to Christ's overflowing grace- not simply to the observance of rules and laws and rituals.

Wherever Jesus came into the lives of those he encountered, it was like turning bland water into sparkling wine; ordinary into the extraordinary; despair into hope; ritual into meaning; brokenness into relationship, need into abundance. This is what it means for Jesus to be alive in the world, for word to be made flesh in ministry together and in acts of faith and service.