

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Scripture:

John 2:1-11 (NRSV)

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. [2] Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. [3] When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." [4] And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." [5] His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." [6] Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. [7] Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. [8] He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. [9] When 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 [10] and 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."

[11] Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

DISCLAIMERS

I think that this sermon needs to come with a few disclaimers. Usually this is the stuff that's in fine print at the bottom of the page. But, today you're in luck. I'm going to give it to you in big bold letters at the very beginning of the sermon!

This is not a story promoting or deploring strong drink. This is not a story that teaches us about the importance of marriage. Those are both important issues, and the Bible has some things to say about them, but this is not the passage that we should use when we want to study those issues.

Today's story is meant to be a symbolic story. It has a deeper, more profound meaning.

Now that statement needs a disclaimer as well. In saying that this story is a symbolic story, I'm not saying that it didn't happen.

Jesus attended a wedding long ago. The wine ran out, and Jesus did something to help supply the need. But, there is more, much more going on in this story than just a tale about water being turned into wine.

In that last verse of today's lesson we read that today's story from John is the first of a series of signs. What does John mean when he calls this story a sign? What kind of sign could it be? What are we supposed to learn from this story?

A SIGN OF ABUNDANT LIFE

A sign in some cases can tell us about the future ... dangerous intersection ahead, watch for falling rocks, wildlife crossing, ten miles to Orlando, road construction for the next fifty miles ... and so forth. If we watch the signs, we will be ready for the future.

And I believe that this is how the word is used in our lesson for today. John has already told us in chapter one that Jesus is God's own Son, the word made flesh. In this story from chapter two we are going to learn something about this one true God revealed in Jesus and the kingdom He brings. The sign is about the future, the messianic age when the water is replaced with wine, and the hope of joy and salvation comes to the whole world.

So what does this particular passage teach us about this coming kingdom?

I think that one of the things this passage teaches us is that God's kingdom will be a kingdom of abundance.

God will not only give us what we need; He will give us more than we need. When it comes to God's providential care, He always gives us more than enough.

Just as the water pots used for ceremonial washings were filled to overflowing with the best wine, those who welcome Jesus into their lives will find that their lives are filled to overflowing with a joy that will not end. Disciples of Jesus should not fear the future; disciples of Jesus believe that the coming kingdom is a kingdom of abundance.

Later on in John's gospel we hear Jesus put it this way, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b)

Life for the Christian is to be full and overflowing. Life is a time to celebrate the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and be gracious toward others.

You might even say that life for the Christian is like a really good party!

NOT ENOUGH

Now that doesn't describe a lot of Christians that I know. If you asked the "man on the street" how he would describe a Christian, I doubt that the words joyous and party loving would come to mind. Most people think that Christians lead a careful, constrained life. We always take the safe path and avoid extremes.

Actually, I think that many people, Christian or not, take this conservative approach to life and why not? Quite frankly, we are worried about the future. We are worried about running out of what we need. Whatever it is that we need in this world, we never seem to have enough. We don't have enough energy. We don't have enough money. We don't have enough love. We don't have enough hope.

Everything seems in short supply, and so for many of us these tough times make us want to "circle the wagons" and hold on to what we've got.

But, Jesus does not seem to be advocating a constrained, restrictive life. In contrast to our way of thinking, Jesus seems to be saying that when it comes to the kingdom of God, the party has just begun.

What is his first major miracle in John's gospel, the first sign of the kingdom that comes? Jesus turns water into wine and not just any wine. This is not Boone's Farm. This is the good stuff.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

Weddings in Jesus' day afforded one of the few opportunities for a work weary people to celebrate and enjoy life. Everyone looked forward to attending a wedding, and even poor families would scrimp and save to put on a decent wedding party.

And in order to economize many families would break open the best wine first and then serve, shall we say, a more recent vintage last when everyone was too "happy" to notice.

But, when Jesus turned the water into wine and had the servants give some to the head steward; it was amazing what the steward discovered. They had saved the best wine for last!

When Jesus is invited to the party, the best is yet to come. When we think that we have run out of resources, Jesus not only gives us what we need; he gives more than we need. God gives us the very best.

RUNNING ON EMPTY

I've had people come to me as a pastor and say something like, "I'm afraid I'm losing my faith." That statement suggests that faith is something that we control, that it's our responsibility to keep the faith. That statement suggests that faith is our responsibility and our creation.

But, self-made faith is never the answer. In fact do it yourself faith is bound to fail. If our faith is limited to what we have and what we can do, it won't be long to we lose our faith. And losing that kind of faith might actually be the first step in our salvation.

I would suggest to you that just as running out of wine made it possible for Jesus to display his power and glory at the wedding feast; sometimes it is

necessary for us to run out of faith so that we have to rely upon God instead of ourselves.

Faith is not a work that we do. Faith is a gift from God. And we cannot learn this lesson in the classroom. It can only be learned in the school of hard knocks, when everything we need seems to be gone and in our distress we turn toward Jesus for help.

It was only when the wedding party ran out of wine that Mary turned to Jesus for help, and quite often, it's only when we find ourselves spiritually dry that we are willing to turn to God and do whatever he calls us to do.

Running out of what we need is not always a bad thing. Sometimes running out of what we need forces us to move forward.

WHO MOVED MY CHEESE?

In the business world they tell a little story, a parable really to illustrate this need to take risks and be constantly moving forward. It's a story about two mice that live in a maze. And in that maze they find a source of food, a huge supply of cheese.

So every day the mice go out to get their cheese. And the cheese is always there, a reliable source of food. But, one day for some unexplained reason the cheese is gone, and as you might imagine the mice are distraught. They ask, "Who moved my cheese?" For several days they keep coming back to the same spot hoping that the cheese will magically reappear.

Finally, one mouse decides to take matters into his own hands. He will begin to explore the maze and try to find other cheese. But, his compatriot is unwilling to take such a risk. Suppose he got lost? Suppose one day the cheese would reappear in its old spot?

And so one mouse is doomed to disappointment because is unwilling to make a move, and the adventurous mouse finds a new source of cheese. The lesson for business is obvious.

If you're selling vinyl records and the compact disc is invented, you better switch over your operations so that you can make compact discs. And in today's digital world, more music sales are made over the internet. So, once again the cheese is about to be moved, and the smart mice will have to move with it. Some day soon the compact disc will be a relic of the past.

Businesses move forward because they are forced to change by economic pressure.

And I think that quite often we move forward in our faith development because we are forced to change by life's circumstances. Only when the wine runs out ... only when we are no longer comfortable are we willing to move forward and follow to the place that God will lead us.

GOD MOVES OUR CHEESE!

I'm not sure that little business parable answers the question that it asks, "Who moved my cheese?" But, from a spiritual standpoint we know the answer to that question. God moves our cheese. The spiritual journey never allows us to get too settled in one place. Many of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures make this very point.

Abraham was always on a journey to a place that God would show him, and all along the way he resided in the Promised Land. Jacob struggled to find the face of God, the eternal blessing, but it was only when Jacob thought that all was lost that God "wrestled him to the ground and changed him forever."

Joseph had dreams of being someone great and powerful. But it was only after losing everything as a slave in Egypt that he was prepared to receive a vision of grace and forgiveness toward his family.

Moses also lost everything. He was banished to the wilderness and was content to spend the rest of his days herding sheep and goats. But, God had other plans for Moses and his people. He led them out of slavery and into the wilderness where they wandered for forty years.

And it was in the wilderness that they learned to trust God's provision. When they had to move every day and count upon God instead of their own abilities

they became who God had called them to be ... a special people, a holy people.

Do you see the common thread? The holy vision comes when the wine runs out. People will not change when they can do the same old thing day after day. But, when they are forced to move, something new and miraculous is possible.

CHANGE IN THE CHURCH

Let me give you a personal example. Being a pastor of a church in a resort area has its advantages and disadvantages. But, one of the great disadvantages, at least from my standpoint, is the transient nature of our membership. We lose and gain members at a higher rate because people tend to move in and out of this area at a higher rate.

When I first came to this church a local pastor said, "If you don't like your church, just wait ten years. It'll be a different church." And that's almost true.

But, some of us don't like that kind of change. We pastors like consistency. We like to keep those people who support us and help us. And many of you are the same way. When someone we love has to go we ask, "What in the world are we going to do now that 'so and so' is gone?" They did everything in this church.

We do indeed miss brothers and sisters who have to leave us, but I have found that sometimes these losses can be the beginning of a new era. Sometimes those who had been less involved in the church now are forced to take on greater leadership roles, and this gives them an opportunity to grow and develop in their walk of faith. And sometimes the church is led in new and exciting directions.

When the wine runs out, it gives us an opportunity to turn to Jesus and ask for new wine.

It gives us an opportunity to move as a people of faith and better proclaim the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ.

BEYOND SURVIVAL

This past week I've been re-reading one of my favorite books, "Beyond Survival." I've mentioned it several times. It's a book by Jim Cushman about the small church. I used it many years ago when I was writing my doctoral project on education in the small church.

Anyway Cushman said that the big problem with the small church is that it becomes too survival oriented. It focuses in on what it doesn't have and what it can't do. It worries about the future and whether it will be able to keep its doors open.

And when these fears become too great it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Suppose Mary instead of going to Jesus about the lack of wine instead just announced to all the wedding guests, "I'm sorry, but we don't have any more wine. You can stay if you wish, but we've run out and don't have the money to get any more."

The feast would have ended. The wedding party would have been scandalized by their failure to be good hosts.

But, that's not what she did. She brought her need to Jesus. And that's what we need to do. We need to bring our need to Jesus. When the resources seem few and the need is great, when it looks like the party's over, we need to recognize that and bring that need to Jesus.

THE HOUR HAS NOT YET COME

And here's where our story gets a little difficult. When Mary brings the need about wine to Jesus, he seems to be a bit harsh with her. He replies, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." John 2:4 (NRSV)

But, I don't think that we need to be too concerned with the seemingly harsh words because Mary doesn't seem to be all that upset by it. She merely tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

In the gospel of John this phrase “my hour” is used of Jesus’ crucifixion. His hour had not yet come, but it was approaching. In light of the momentous world changing event, using his power to save a party was akin to the temptation to turn stones into bread in the desert. It would make him popular, but it would not advance God’s purposes.

Quite often when we bring our requests to Jesus, we come like Mary ... not aware of what is really going on and what is really of major importance for the kingdom of God. When I look back upon my life and the things that bothered me about what was going on in the church, I now see that many of those things were of little significance for God’s kingdom.

We tend to major in minors. Our only desire is to keep the party going. But, just as there was a greater hour coming for Jesus, so there is a greater hour coming for us as well. And with that in mind, when we bring our requests to Jesus, we also must be able to say with Mary, “Do whatever Jesus tells you to do.”

A SIGN OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus did provide wine for the wedding.

Why did Jesus do that? I don’t think Jesus changed his mind just to keep his mother happy. That was what the some of the mothers in my Bible study thought this past week. They said, “After all she was still his mama and if mama isn’t happy no one is happy.” With all due respect to mothers everywhere, in this case I don’t believe that is true.

No, Jesus chose to use this moment to symbolize the kingdom that was coming. In Jesus’ hands the miracle became more than just a story of water being turned into wine. It became a symbol of the new wine of God’s kingdom.

In early Christian art, portrayals of Jesus turning water into wine were often paired with pictures of the feeding of the five thousand. Do you get the connection?

In both stories Jesus miraculously gives the people more than enough. A 180 gallons of the best wine is made available when the party is about to end, and so much food is given the 5,000 from five loaves and two small fish that they have twelve baskets full of leftovers after it's all said and done.

And in both stories we have a foreshadowing of the time when the hour has come, and Jesus eats the last supper with his disciples. He shares the wine and the bread, and talks about body broken and blood shed. His death on the cross for our sins, and his resurrection for our justification was a spiritual miracle that is still multiplying blessings and feeding people all over the world.

Like the disciples of old, when we see and understand this miracle, we too will believe and trust Jesus to give us more than enough when the time comes. We will be able to trust the words of Mary and wait for instructions from our Lord instead of going on and doing what we want to do. We believe the One who can turn water into wine can also change lives.

BEER INTO FURNITURE

Whenever I preach on this passage I just have to use my favorite illustration. Some of you have heard it before, but I think this story ... just like some of us ... gets better with age.

The great commentator William Barclay told a story about a man who was a blue collar worker who loved to drink. In fact, he became an alcoholic and abused his family. He frittered away their money on strong drink and other worthless causes.

But, one day the man met Jesus, and he was changed by that encounter. He quit drinking and became more responsible in his lifestyle. Everyone was happy about the change ... everyone that is except his drinking buddies.

He worked with them every day, and they teased him unmercifully about his new religion. One day one of these ex-friends said derisively, "Surely you don't believe all those miracle stories in the Bible. For instance, you don't really believe that Jesus turned water into wine?"

The new convert replied, “I don’t know about Jesus turning water into wine, but my own life he has turned beer into furniture.” That’s what this miracle is all about ... about the power of Jesus to transform things ... water into wine ... beer into furniture ... anger into love ... unbelief into faith ... sorrow into joy.

When Jesus comes things change ... and more importantly people change. Are you running on empty? Is the joy gone from your life? Do you need to be filled with something more?

I believe that Jesus still brings us a taste of new wine. One theologian put it this way, the wine of Christ, “is a pure drink, that you may become possessed by that divine intoxication which is more sober than sobriety itself.”

May God change us this very day ... filling our cups to the brim with hope and new life.

Amen.