

John 2:1-11 (NRSV)

The Wedding at Cana

2 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.

Behold! A New thing!

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: January 14, 2007

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 2:1-11

Let's imagine that we were telling a brief story of our time together this morning, describing being in church this morning. Maybe it would go something like this. They gathered in the lovely sanctuary. They were seated in pews, each of which sat four or five people, but a few had room for only one person. As people gathered, they asked one another about whether the furnace was working correctly this Sunday. They opened their hymnals and sang hymns. The music director led the choir and played the organ. The minister read the Bible and preached the sermon, and some said to one another that he must be trying to be a rock star with that microphone thing he was wearing around his head.

Now, let's imagine you are reading this story two-thousand years from now, in the year 4007. Parts of it would sound very familiar, we can guess. Of course that would mean that Christianity was still alive and people still went to church. But that might not even be true. Certainly many religions from two-thousand years before us are long gone. But let's imagine that Christianity is flourishing two-thousand years from today. People still go to church. They sing hymns. They hear anthems and scripture and sermons. From the vantage-point of two-thousand years hence you might think you have a pretty good picture of what went on today. But then you read a little closer and you see some things that you're not quite sure of.

You might say, pews. Let's see, it says they sit in them, so they must be some kind of seating, some kind of seating that in some cases several people sit in. But you might not know much more about them. You certainly wouldn't know that in almost every church of our era pews were one of the things that defined a church. You'd miss the fact that when people of our era walk into a building and see them, we immediately know we are in church.

And the questions about the heating system. By two-thousand years from now, certainly they won't be heating with fossil fuels. No doubt, completely clean, reliable energy of some form will be invented. No doubt there won't be furnaces and heating pipes. So you won't know much about our kind of heating system. Certainly you will know, by inference from the questions being asked by people in the story, that the heating system has been unreliable. But then you might conclude that all heating systems of this era are unreliable, rather than that this is a new heating system that is just going through its initial adjustments.

Two-thousand years from now, you might still be singing hymns, but you probably won't have hymnals. And you wouldn't know about the attachment that people in our era developed for one hymnal or another. And this rock-star microphone. Two-thousand years from now the way in which sound is handled in public spaces will be entirely different. Maybe there will be little sensors instead of microphones. There won't be speakers. There will be little receivers the size of small ear-rings. And we will control what we hear just by our thoughts. You could think, this sermon isn't very good, give me ESPN, and bingo, you'd be hearing the football game. Of course, the minister would have an equally sophisticated signal-jamming device, and he would

snap you back to the sermon in an instant.

Well, anyway, you get the point. Two-thousand years from now, when someone reads this little description of our morning together, there will be some things they understand. However, there will also be some things that will seem familiar, but which they really miss altogether, unless they learn quite a bit about our era. And there will be some things that make no sense at all.

I think you see where I am going with this. Our faith is in great measure founded on the Bible, a two-thousand year-old book. We can make pretty good sense of a lot of the stories in it. They seem familiar enough for us to understand them. For example, when the wine steward in this morning's story tells the bridegroom that most people serve poor wine after the guests have had the good wine, we immediately understand his meaning. We know that our guests' taste for good wine will be more discriminating before they get a little tipsy. After they've had a bit to drink, they won't notice an inferior wine. The story seems very contemporary to us.

But, of course, there is a danger here. I don't mean the danger of drinking too much wine; although that may be a danger. But right now I'm talking of the fact that there is a lot in the Bible that is far from our daily experience, just like in our little story about going to church here this morning. In the case of this morning's passage from John, we might easily be left with the idea that the miracle Jesus performed in turning the water into wine is the point of the story. We might think that the disciples and others believed in him because he was able to perform a bit of alchemy, turning plain water into a vintage Cabernet. As we'll see, that's not really the point at all. So something we think we understand, we actually may not.

On the other hand, we might easily miss the very important significance of the jars in the story. We might just assume they are sort of large carafes. Most of us don't know anything about ancient Jewish rites of purification, or the jars that held the water. But they are central to the story.

Jewish purity laws required that hands and utensils be washed or cleaned by pure water before going into the Temple, for example. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this concept for observant Jews. The jars were stone, rather than pottery, because the stone would not absorb impurities. At the Temple, there would be huge jars, not unlike the ones in today's passage, filled with water for purification.

But the interesting thing is that jars of this size would never be found in someone's home. Immediately, Jesus' followers would have understood that the story was not really about a family wedding and running out of wine. The jars suggest that the Temple and the Temple rites are in play. Jesus' followers would have noticed that the jars were empty. And they would have grasped that Jesus not only commanded the jars to be filled with water, but that he then changed the water into something even better.

It would be hard to miss Jesus' point that the Temple rites had dried-up. It brings to mind the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel. Jesus says that the Temple rites are bone-dry, but that he brings their restoration. More than their restoration, he brings their betterment. He brings not just pure water but fine wine. Later in the Gospel of John Jesus says that he is the true vine and that God is the vinegrower. And at his death, Jesus is offered a taste of sour wine from a jar. This was the cheap, soured, usually diluted wine of the time. In this final scene Jesus receives the wine, bows his head, announces that it is finished, and dies. The true vine and the bearer of the fine wine notes one last time the inferior state of the world, represented by inferior wine.

So, two-thousand years later, with a little digging, we have managed to figure out some very important things that are not immediately apparent to us in reading this passage. It has not much to do with wedding receptions and a lot to do with Jesus and his relationships to and with the religious landscape and tradition of his birth. We've learned quite a lot. But we aren't quite done uncovering what is hidden.

It would be hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus is announcing to the world that Judaism is the inferior wine, and that he has replaced it with the good stuff. This passage would look like a text *par excellence* for demonstrating that Jesus was anti-Jewish, or at least anti-Judaism. And it is absolutely the case that the Gospel of John has been the supreme source of supercessionism and anti-Semitism throughout Christian history. We owe it to ourselves and to those of other faiths, especially Judaism, to investigate the text more thoroughly and more carefully than has often been done to be certain that we are understanding what Jesus was trying to say and what his meaning is for us.

First, to state the obvious, Jesus considered himself to be a faithful Jew. He was Jewish, and he understood himself to be such. His Bible was the Jewish Bible. When he quotes scripture, he quotes the Old Testament. So it is ludicrous to say that this faithful Jew meant to be anti-Semitic, or to destroy the faith of his heritage.

However, Jesus was discouraged by the condition that he found Judaism in. He did think that many of the Temple rituals had become empty. When he tried to live according the scriptures, the religious authorities were often his most vicious antagonists. It is fair to say that Jesus thought the Temple jars had become empty, not because the Jewish religion was at heart arid, but because it had in some cases become so. Jesus saw himself filling, reviving the very vessels of his own faith tradition. The analogue to today is evident, is it not? Imagine Jesus looking out at Christianity today. He who chose to eat with those most despised by his society would see people today using his name to despise and create outcasts in our society. He who said time and again that his was a living faith, not a faith of lifeless prohibitions, would find many today in his name playing senseless games of Biblical legalism. Jesus said the rocks would cry out over the state of Jerusalem in his time. Do those same rocks not cry out today?

So, first and foremost, Jesus saw himself to be calling his tradition back to its best self. But he also believed that his tradition could go forward and continue to grow. He wanted not only to restore the water in the jars, but also make it into something even better. Now, I want to be very careful here. I am not saying that Jesus invented Christianity, and that Christianity then superseded Judaism. I am saying that no faith, that no faith that is a living faith, stands still. Judaism itself has grown and developed and enlarged itself since Jesus' time. It has taken new forms. It has found new ways of thinking and being.

What Jesus was doing is what we must always be doing. First and foremost, we must be cajoling, prodding, begging, encouraging our faith traditions from going backwards, which they all too often seem inclined to do. Jesus saw the dry, empty jars and knew that they were representative of the backwards plunge of his own faith tradition. It was not even close to the best that his tradition had to offer. But second, Jesus also meant to encourage his tradition to be a living tradition, becoming new and fresh. In that sense Christianity, like Judaism itself, changed the tradition it inherited. It was not simply a rejection. The old jars and so much else speak of the continuity. But the good new wine speaks to the fact that every faith tradition is on the move, a work in progress.

In our era one of those who caught the lightning that Jesus was about was Martin Luther King, Jr. He understood well that racism in the United States was inconsistent with the Christian faith. As a minister of the Gospel, he eloquently made that case over and over again. But he also challenged the Christian faith as well as the nation to become something new. Martin knew that you could pull passages out of the Bible that at least accepted slavery. Today, we can find passages that seem to accept discrimination by gender or sexual orientation. Like Martin did, like Jesus himself did, we face a double project. The jars of the Christian faith are all too often dried-up, lifeless, or arid. The first part of the project is to call it back to its best self, to fill the jars with pure water again. But the second project we face is to use the core tenets of our faith to enlarge it beyond its historical limitations. The second project is to take “love your neighbor as yourself,” to take, “take the log out of your own eye before you criticize the speck in your brother’s,” and so forth, to take those core tenets and use them to measure anything we say in the name of Jesus. Then, when we look into the jar, it won’t be empty and desicated, it won’t even be full of water, it will be full of the finest wine you could ever imagine. And a shout will go out of your heart, it will go out into the neighborhood, it will go out into all of creation. A shout will go out: Behold! A new thing! Behold this very fine wine! Amen.