

John 2:1-11

On 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.

Transforming Wine

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Text: *John 2:1-11*

When I looked at the passage from this week's lectionary reading, I must admit that I cringed a little to find out that the passage from the Gospel According to John was about the miracle story of Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Miracles are tough stuff to talk about in this age of reason and science. In our liberal Christian religion, miracles are even tougher to preach about. Nevertheless, I decided to soldier on, and instead of moving to the lectionary passages from the Psalms or Isaiah, I felt moved to continue focusing on the passage from John.

Now this is a very familiar miracle story. We have all have heard in Sunday school. In fact it might be one of the best-known miracle stories of Jesus of Nazareth. As often happens for me when reading these well known scripture passages, a related story will come to mind. Now, *I heard about this minister driving down to New York to see a show and he's stopped in Connecticut for speeding. The state trooper smells alcohol on his breath and then he sees an empty wine bottle on the floor, and he says, "Sir, have you been drinking?"*

And the minister says, "Just water."

"Then why do I smell wine?"

And the minister looks down at the bottle and says, "Good Lord, He's done it again!"¹

Now I don't want to go on and on making light of this—what some would say is a highly improbably feat of winemaking, so let's really look closely at our passage today and see where it takes us.

First of all, we know from many theological studies and debates that the author of John, who some think was John the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' disciples, used a lot of symbolism in his text. Some of this symbolism was very subtle, very nuanced, and of course, whenever that happens it can lead to a lot of different conclusions about what exactly the author was trying to tell us. In a way, though, this is great news. In fact, it

¹ <http://www.nfldproducts.com/jokes/showjoke.php?jokeid=414>

is one of the wonderful things about our Bible. We get to struggle on our own, and with others, about the meaning. And you know I think that is exactly what God wants. We learn more, we believe deeper, when a little extra effort is required. Scripture can be transforming.

Now many biblical scholars believe that John used a special source for the seven miracle stories in his Gospel. They call this the “Source of Signs or Semeia Source” using the Greek form. Changing the water into wine, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and all the rest of the miracle stories in between are all part of this source of signs that John incorporated into his account of the life of Jesus. As my professor of the New Testament, Helmut Koester says, “the miracles of Jesus are more than miracles, they are epiphanies.”² And, epiphanies can do what? They can transform the way one thinks, perhaps, the way one acts. Epiphanies, or those “aha” moments when we finally “get it” and then are opened up to transformation.

Speaking of the signs that John uses in his text, this wedding in ancient Cana took place, John says on the “third day.” The mother of Jesus was there along with him as well as a few of the disciples who Jesus had just recruited to follow him. If we follow the text of John from the first chapter we could deduce that this third day was the third day after John the Baptist had seen Jesus coming toward him and declared him to be the “lamb of God” (Jn. 1:29). But we also know that the third day has a much more significant meaning for the later Easter story. Also, the sign of changing the water into wine and the change of heart demonstrated by Jesus at the wedding in Cana represents in the Gospel of John the beginning of Jesus ministry. Therefore, the mother of Jesus was there at the beginning of his ministry in Cana, and at the end of his ministry, which of course, was at the cross of his crucifixion. So we see in just the first sentence of our story, John’s writing is thick with symbolism and meaning.

I also think it is interesting to note that this sign performed at the wedding seemed unplanned. It happens so many times in our lives that unexpected events or signs can transform us. Jesus even seemed reluctant to get involved in the impending social *faux pas* that was about to occur until his Jewish mother prodded him and said Jesus, my son, “they have no wine.” As we learned a few weeks ago when Tom told us the story of how Jesus hung around the temple stubbornly arguing over the Torah with the rabbis, Jesus could sometimes, shall we say, challenge his parents. He replies to his mother rather curtly, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come?” But, of course, Jesus is transformed in the moment,

² Koester, Helmut, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1990), p. 205.

as can often happen when moms challenge their sons to take up responsibility. Jesus he goes ahead and asks the servants at the wedding feast to fill the water jars up to brim! Then sometime between the times the jars are filled with water and the time the wine steward tastes the beverage, the water is transformed into the best wine of the feast. Although Jesus says his hour had not yet come, in one sense Jesus' "hour" had come—the hour of his ability to make true believers out of the disciples that were with him at the feast had come; the disciples "believed in him" after this sign—this epiphany of theirs. But, of course, the parallel hour of the death of Jesus on the cross was yet to occur.

Now this feast was a typical Jewish wedding feast of the time. One of the important rules of purity that needed to be followed was that wedding guests must ritually wash their hands before partaking of food. That is what the stone jars were for—these were jars required by the "Jewish rites of purification," as John says. Sometimes we get new insights into changes that need to be made in our lives, or a new course of action that we need to take, when we view something out of the ordinary happening, something radical taking place that gives new meaning to old behaviors or customs. As theologian Bruce Chilton tells us

Archeologists have discovered the kind of stone jars described at Kana in first-century Jewish settlements in Galilee. How Jesus used those...emblems of Jewish identity was, in the symbolic language of early Judaism, even more radical than changing water into wine: by imbibing [the] waters of purification during the festivity, and having others join him, he insisted that the purity of Israel was indeed to begin *from the inside*...³

I think Jesus recognized powerful potential in the moment—in the mundane stone jars. And the new disciples recognized powerful potential in Jesus at this wedding feast—Jesus, the lowly carpenter from Nazareth. Transformation *from within* was happening. Jesus could have shrugged his social duty as a guest at the wedding feast and begged off helping. Peter, Nathanael, and Phillip could have chosen an easier journey to take and decided not to follow in the way of Jesus. They all had options. They all experienced epiphanies. They got it. They chose a different journey, a

³ Chilton, Bruce, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography*, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 184-185.

dangerous journey, but world changing, as it turned out. They opened themselves up to the possibility of change.

United Church of Christ Pilgrim Press author Mike Riddell tells us that “any intentional journey has a departure point and a destination. But between those two points there is an almost infinite range of options as to how the distance might be traversed. Riddell says it is no different for the journey of the soul. Our choices are legion; often so much so that they paralyze the cautious traveler into inaction. Picking a path is the task of life,” Riddell says. It is “the adventurous interplay between the voice of God, which calls us forward, and our own exercise of freedom as we find our unique way.”⁴ As a preacher friend of mine recently said, “let us plant ourselves at the gates of hope.”⁵ Being open to transformation, to change, requires hope. Hope for a closer connection with God and with our community; hope that can lead us to spiritual renewal or greater justice in the world.

One of my favorite movies is the film “Chocolat.” Of course, it’s not about wine that tastes good (just as the story from John is not really about exquisite wine). Nor is the movie really about good tasting chocolate. This movie

takes place in a small town in France in 1959. The town has always expressed their community life using the word [tranquility]. You knew what was expected of you, you knew what your place was. And if you happened to forget, someone would remind you. They trusted the wisdom of ages past, lived with the values of tradition, family, and morality. Into this town comes Vianne, played by Juliette Binoche. She does not go to church, has a daughter without a father present, and has the gall to open a [chocolate shop] right in the middle of Lent! As she opens and conducts her business, it becomes clear that she is anything but traditional. Vianne does nothing by the book. She does nothing out of obligation, but everything out of love. It is her encouragement [and love] that brings Josephine out of her abusive marriage. It is her encouragement [and love] that brings Armande together with her grandson. It is her encouragement [and love] that brings a widow of 30-some-years out of

⁴ Riddell, Mike, *Sacred Journey: Spiritual Wisdom for Times of Transition*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 45-46)

⁵ Rev. Phyllis O’Connell, Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills, Nancy Palmer Jones Ordination Sermon, Jan. 11, 2004.

mourning and into a new relationship. The town is transformed by her [chocolate shop] and her grace.⁶

Now, tomorrow we honor and celebrate Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King loved and followed Jesus Christ. King was transformed by the life of and relationship he had with Jesus Christ. King had big dreams, world-changing dreams, but he knew that the real work of transforming the world, transforming himself was in the grassroots, every day struggle for justice and peace. An associate of Rev. King, Vincent Harding who wrote the wonderful book, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, tells us in a article for *The Other Side* magazine, that King's "dream" was not "a cozy, abstract idea floating in our conscience and memory. It [grew] out of and flows back into the practical, active work and struggle for social transformation...[Harding says] Peter [the apostle] sought to imprison a transfigured Jesus by building tents on the mountaintop—which would have impeded the messianic mission and the path of discipleship. We too must resist the temptation to shelter Brother Martin in a tent of 'civil rights,'" says Harding. Harding says, "We must follow Martin beyond Washington. We must follow him as he moves into dark places where dreams struggle against nightmares, [where there are] places of risk and trial, places of deeper prophetic challenges and no easy answers."⁷

Jesus, too, was an inconvenient hero, sometimes the reluctant hero as we learned from John. Through his life and our relationship with Jesus, there may be times, too, when we are reluctant to see the signs and heed the epiphanies that can transform us. It will be risky, it will be a struggle, but there is so much love, so much grace waiting for us in community with each other and with Jesus Christ. Let us drink of the wine of transformation when the cup is offered. Let us stand at the gates of hope. Let us open ourselves to the movement and transformation of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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⁶ Powell, Carla Thompson, found at <http://www.textweek.com/movies/transformation.htm>

⁷ Harding, Vincent, "The Road to Redemption," in *The Other Side* magazine, January-February, 2003, found at http://www.theotherside.org/archive/jan-feb03/harding_print.html