

John 2:1-11

THE SIGN OF NEW LIFE

There is a wonderful Nigerian folk tale about the tribal chief, who sent out his messengers to invite all of the men of the tribe to a great feast. "All of the food will be provided," they announced, "but each man must bring one jug of palm wine." One of the men of the tribe, Ezra, wanted to attend the great festival very much, but he had no wine. He paced the floor of his hut trying to think of a solution for his dilemma. Finally his wife suggested, "You could buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive for such a great occasion." "How foolish," Ezra cried, "to spend money when there is a way to go free." Once again he paced until he came upon a plan. "Rather than wine I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred men will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great pot of wine?"

On the day of the feast the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, reminding the people of the great festival. All of the men came dressed in their finest clothes, gathering by midmorning at the home of the chief. As each man entered the tribal grounds, he poured his jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Ezra carefully poured the contents of his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers.

When all of the guests had arrived, the chief commanded the music to cease and ordered the servants to fill everyone's cup with wine. As the chief spoke the opening words of the festival, all of the guests raised their cups and drank. Suddenly a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd, and they quickly drank again. What they tasted was not wine, but water. It seems each guest had decided that his one jug of water could not possibly spoil the great pot of palm wine.

Whereas Ezra and all of the others thought they could simply get by with giving the least, by giving water instead of wine (after all, who would know the difference?), in the Gospel lesson for today, we see quite the opposite taking place. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, Jesus used water and gave wine instead. Jesus took what was available and, somehow, produced a fine wine, which enriched and extended the wedding celebration to the delight of all present.

The biblical text suggests a number of preaching possibilities. Early on in John's gospel, we see Jesus enjoying himself in the midst of a wedding reception. Jesus - Emmanuel/God with us - delighted in sharing life, love, and laughter with those around him. I am quite certain that Jesus had one of those rare personalities that could light up a room or an occasion and ensured that everyone present would have an enjoyable and meaningful time. Surely, Jesus' presence at the wedding spared the bride and groom from deep shame and humiliation if the wine had run out and their guests had been left with empty cups. Jesus' actions, and the steward's public compliment about saving the best wine until last, brought great joy and affirmation to the bride and groom.

When Mary told Jesus they had no wine, Jesus' response sounded quite curt. However, in addressing his mother as "Woman," Jesus was actually affording her a title of respect in that first century, Jewish culture. Also, by asking, "what concern is that to you and to me," Jesus was gently informing Mary that he would take care of the matter in his own way, in his own time, and in a manner so that God's will would be done. There is also a sense that Jesus would determine the specifics of when and how he would act, rather than have someone else (even his own mother) force his or her own agenda on him. It's clear from the text that

Mary did not feel rebuffed by Jesus' answer. Instead, she informed the servants to be ready and "Do whatever he tells you."

John informs us that there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, and each one held between twenty and thirty gallons of water. By doing so, John might be suggesting that the age of ritual purification was giving way to something new experienced within Jesus' words and deeds and particularly when his "hour" (i.e., the hour of his death) finally did come, which alone resulted in the forgiveness of one's sins. Perhaps John envisions the time of water cleansing being replaced by the wine of another and better way - namely, through Jesus' broken body and shed blood.

Another important feature of this text, which is common throughout all four gospels, is how Jesus employs others to do the work of God. When Jesus was ready to spring into action, he instructed the servants to fill the jars full with water and then to draw some out and take it to the steward to taste. They did as instructed. The end result was that the water had become wine - really fine wine!

Jesus saved the party with the help of some very human hands. Repeatedly, Jesus used others to be the way by which God's will was done. He opted to employ others to accomplish the work at hand so that they had some sense of ownership and involvement in bringing about God's kingdom here on earth. That strategy is no less true today. As someone has said, "Faith is an activity; it is something I do... Christ asks us to do all we can, just as he asked the servants at the party to fill the empty jars with water. Then we stand back and allow God to do what none of us can do. Those servants filled the jars; then they drew some off. But what a surprise! What a contrast between the pale, tasteless water that went in and what they drew out." (Arthur Suelztz, *Deeper Into John's Gospel*, pp. 43-44)

G. Porter Taylor tells of his friend named Charles. Charles told him of a woman with cancer. Janet is in great pain much of the time. For her the wine has run out, and Charles didn't know what to do. But one afternoon he remembered that he had a wonderful Chinese silk kimono. He took it to Janet, and gave it to her, because it was all he could think of. Now when Janet is in great pain, she puts it on, and somehow, she is not alone. She knows she is part of the wedding feast. The kimono changes the water into wine. (*Lectionary Homiletics*, January 2001, p. 14)

We could spend some time talking about miracles - the miracles recorded in the Bible and the miracles that we have experienced in our own lives or the lives of people we know - when the ordinary became transformed into the extraordinary or something special happened, which cannot be easily explained.

For today's purpose, I think it is important to talk about the significance of each of the six water jars now filled with some twenty or thirty gallons of the finest wine. John tells us this was the first of Jesus' signs. To be sure, 120 to 180 gallons of excellent wine point to not only the abundant grace of God but also to the new and exhilarating quality that Jesus can and does bring to our lives. According to Dr. William Barclay, "Without Jesus life is dull, stale, and flat; when Jesus comes into life, life becomes vivid and sparkling and exciting. This story is John saying to us: 'If you want the new exhilaration, become a follower of Jesus Christ, and then there will come a change in your life which will be like water turning into wine.'" (Pp. 90-91).

Have you experienced the qualitative difference that Christ Jesus has brought about in your own life? Have you tasted the fine wine that Christ offers you to fill and fulfill who you are and what you do? This past week was special

for me for two reasons. On Monday, Monica and I celebrated our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, and, on Friday, I celebrated my eighth anniversary with this congregation and the beginning of my ninth year. I am profoundly aware of the grace of God in both my marriage and in my call to serve as your pastor. To be honest, both relationships have had their times of difficulties but looking back over the years, what stand out the most are the profound grace of God and the joy of being with Monica and with you. My life is filled with God's blessings, the rich presence of Christ, and the gifts that the Holy Spirit imparts. I hope the same is true for you.

As I reflect on my journey, the sign of new life in Christ points the way in every direction. I remember the time I was counseling a person, who was overly distraught and could not begin to fathom that God could ever forgive her for her sins. At one point, I looked her straight in the eyes, called her by name, and said to her: "In Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Believe that good news of the Gospel." I was simply the messenger but I also became the witness as I watched the peace of God flow throughout her entire being. It was as if all of the guilt and self-loathing drained out of her and she was filled to the brim with the new wine of God's love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and peace.

A year ago this month, our beloved son Andrew died after a 3 1/2 year battle with cancer. Despite the heartache and grief, God has filled me with new life and a deep hope in Christ. I can't prove it but I know Andrew is with the Lord in heaven; I know that the risen Christ is with me; and I believe in the communion of the saints. By God's grace, and nothing else, I know I will be reunited with Andrew once again and forever. I'm not always a patient person, but I can and will wait for that new heavenly life - with the Lord our God, with Andrew, and all of the saints within the Church triumphant - which will last for all eternity.

I could go on and on about the new quality of life that our Lord Jesus brings to us now and forever. And, I hope and trust that you could do the same. Let me close by telling you this true story, which seems to sum up the Gospel truth of God's rich and abundant grace in our lives. At a church's Sunday School program there was an eight-year-old boy named Stephen, who was mentally and physically challenged. Stephen participated in his class as best as could along with the other students. During the month of April, the teacher asked all of her young students to place inside a plastic egg some object, which represented new life in the spring.

The next Sunday, the teacher gathered up all of the unmarked plastic eggs so she could open them one by one. The children were not supposed to reveal who had brought a specific item, which represented new life in the spring. The first egg had a flower in it; one child was so excited she blurted out, "I brought that one!" The next egg held a rock. The teacher and children were puzzled until Joey said that his rock had moss on it, and moss is a sign of life. The third egg contained a pretty butterfly; Sally said that her choice was the best one of all. When the teacher opened the fourth plastic egg, nothing was in it. She suspected that this was Stephen's egg, and he must not have understood the assignment. So, without making a comment, the teacher reached for the next plastic egg. Before she could open it, however, Stephen jumped to his feet saying, "Please, don't skip mine!" The teacher said to him, "But Stephen, your egg is empty." "That's right," Stephen said, "the tomb was empty, and that's new life for all of us!"

There's more to this true story: that summer, Stephen's physical condition grew worse and he died. It's interesting to note that at his funeral, atop his

casket, there were eight plastic eggs - seven from his classmates and one from the teacher. And you know what else? All eight of those plastic eggs were empty! That's right, empty! Because, as Stephen said it so well, "The tomb was empty, and that's new life for all of us!" (Told by Dr. Martin Marty in an article that appeared in Context magazine, date unknown)

Let us go forth and enjoy the exhilarating life and the abundant grace that God pours out upon us in Jesus Christ. Let us look for those signs of new life so that we can share them with others, and let us also be grateful and give praise and glory to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

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