

WHY? Lent 3
Why Turn Water into Wine?
February 24th, 2008
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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.

Wednesday evenings during Lent we are offering Open Communion in room 104, a time to come and pray and receive communion from Steve or I. Shortly before 5:45 this week I headed down to room 104, turned down the lights, lit a few candles, turned on some music, prepared the elements, and settled in waiting for people to come and spend time in prayer and receive communion. For the first 20 minutes or so there was a slow, but steady stream of visitors and then shortly after six I found myself alone in the room. I pulled out my notes for my class that evening and started looking over them.

As I sat there I heard the front doors down by the main office open and close and soon heard the voices of small children in the hall. After what I imagine was a few minutes of taking off gloves and hats and hanging up coats, I heard footsteps coming down the hall. As one of the small children walked past room 104 he looked in, had a very startled look on his face and turned on his heels. I heard him say to the others in the hallway – there's someone in

there. There's someone in there in the dark with candles. He was confused and concerned, not quite sure what to think.

After a minute or two he and his siblings worked up their courage and peeked back into the room. "It's only Jeff" one of them proclaimed and they all came into the room full of questions. "What are you doing?" "Why do you have the lights off?" "Why do you have candles lit?" "What are you doing?" I told them I was there serving communion and we talked a little bit about what that was. In spite of their curiosity and the energy they had as they asked questions, tried to blow out candles, investigated the bread and the cup, we had some good conversation. I asked them if they wanted to take communion and they were all very excited. We talked a little bit about what that meant, I gave them some instructions and then they all took a piece of bread, dipped it into the cup, and ate it. We all prayed together and I reminded them that God loves them. It was a great time, a good old party in room 104 on a Wednesday evening.

As they left the silence that filled the room seemed out of place. So often communion is a quiet, somber, reflective and meditative ritual and having the great communion party that I had Wednesday night I was struck by how appropriate the noise, the laughter, and the questions were as those young children and I celebrated communion together. I imagine that the Last Supper was much the same, with children scattered throughout the room, playing, laughing, and asking questions.

This morning we continue our Lenten sermon series asking the big question "why" and wrestling with some specific questions about Jesus and the life of faith. Last week Steve wrestled with the question "why perform miracles?" and for the next couple of weeks we're going to look at some of the specific miracles Jesus performed. As we look at these miracles

we'll be looking, not just at what was going on when the gospel writers recorded these stories, but also what these miracles can teach us about the life of faith today.

Last week as Steve talked a little bit about miracles in general. He challenged us to redefine what is meant when we talk about a miracle. Often, he explained, miracles are understood to be supernatural interventions that disrupt or change natural laws or the course of events. He challenged us to think of miracles, ones that Jesus performed as well as those we experience today, as something wonderful. If we begin to understand that miracles don't have to be about supernatural intervention, but can be about the wonderful things of every day life, we can more fully begin to understand and appreciate God's work in our lives and in the world.

This morning we look at the first of the miracles that Jesus performed. According to the Gospel of John, the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana was the first of Jesus's miracles. The first chapter of the gospel of John closes with Jesus telling his first disciples that they would witness great things. Chapter two opens with the following story:

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 bridegroom¹⁰ 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.

Marcus Borg, in his book “The Heart of Christianity,” a book that several of us are studying this Lent as a part of WVE, talks about this story, specifically about the power of understanding it metaphorically and not just literally.

So, what is the story of Jesus about? According to John’s inaugural story of Jesus’ public activity, it is about a wedding. More: it is about a wedding banquet. More: it is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out. More: it is about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out, and the best is saved for last. The story of the wedding at Cana invites us to see that the story of Jesus is about this.

A literal reading can miss all of that. Instead, it generates a factual question that is a distraction and can be a stumbling block: Do you believe this really happened? By not focusing on this question, a metaphorical reading enables us to see the rich meanings of the text.

Reading this story literally, the question, “why did Jesus turn water to wine” has what seems like a pretty clear answer to me – because his mom told him to. And that wouldn’t be a wrong answer, but if we stop there we miss so much more of the meaning that is present in this text. The metaphorical meaning or meanings of this story are what I want to spend the bulk of our time focusing on this morning.

As we look at this story as a metaphor for God’s work in our lives through Christ, let’s break down the story and look at several different pieces. The New Interpreter’s Bible explains that Biblical miracles such as this often follow a traditional formula: Setting, Preparation for the Miracle, The Miracle, and a Conclusion. There is something for us to learn about the power of this miracle from each of these four different pieces of the formula.

The first couple of verses of this chapter give us very little in the way of setting, but provide us with a few interesting details. The most interesting of these is that Jesus is at this wedding with his mom and with his disciples. Only two days prior had Jesus called these disciples to follow him and so it seems clear that these first disciples were already family friends. Jesus, these friends who were disciples, and Jesus' mother were all attending this wedding, presumably hosted by family friends. This miracle that Jesus is about to perform is not on some grandiose scale, it is not a big public showing.

This first miracle of Jesus, his coming out, if you will, was first to family and friends, during a celebration of life. The implication of this for us as people of faith today is quite simple, but profound nonetheless. We are to make our allegiance known, to declare to whom we belong, and we are to do this where we are. Many times we are hesitant to share our faith with family or friends for fear of what they will think. Jesus models for us in this story that we are, in fact, to begin by declaring the good news and by sharing works of God's life giving goodness with our friends and family.

The second piece of this passage, verses 3-5, is the preparation for the miracle. This section presents the problem that exists, the need for the miracle. The wedding celebration has run out of wine. Mary comes to Jesus to tell him of the problem and it is clear from the text that she expects him to do something about it. Mary seems to already know that Jesus is capable of addressing the problem, but it is clear that Jesus isn't comfortable doing so. There is clear conflict here, between a mother's wishes and her son's desires.

Illustrated here is the hesitancy that we often have. Others can see the gifts we have, others ask us to use our gifts to address problems that exist, but often we're not comfortable using these gifts. Here we see Jesus wrestling with the same.

Ultimately though, Jesus does take a step forward and perform the miracle, in this third section of the story. In verses 6-8 of this text the author goes into much more detail than has been used thus far in the story. The number of jars, their composition, their purpose are all talked about. For as much water as Jesus ends up turning into wine it is clear that this is quite the party, and God's love is shared in a radical and extravagant way. Not only does Jesus produce a large quantity of wine, but it is of great quality.

The extravagance in quantity and quality serve to illustrate the superabundance of gifts available through Jesus. In the Hebrew Scriptures, an abundance of good wine is a symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age. The original hearers and readers of this story would have picked up on this symbolism. Jesus brought about these gifts of wine, Jesus marks the arrival of God's new age.

Finally, the conclusion of this story in John offers public attestation to what Jesus has done and by implication who Jesus is. The wine steward samples the wine and confirms that indeed it is wine, and not just any wine, but very good quality. Readers of the story see in this conclusion, that indeed, Jesus shares some kind of a divine connection with God. As hearers of that story today we are invited to acknowledge the same, that Jesus is connected to God in a very real and tangible way and that through Jesus we are invited into an encounter with and an experience of God.

Having spent a few minutes looking at these four different aspects of this story, let's return to some of our initial questions for the day. Why would the author of John include this story as one of the first in his gospel? Why would it have been significant that Jesus turned water into wine? Why does it matter to us today that Jesus turned water into wine? For all of these reasons we just talked about: so that readers could understand the importance of sharing

God's blessings with family and friends, so readers could understand the realities of what life is like without God's blessings, so that readers could understand the abundant gifts that Christ offers, and so that readers could see and experience the truth and the reality of what Christ offers, the abundance of good things that come as a blessing from God.

All of these four different pieces for me can be summed up in one phrase – radical hospitality. Jesus steps out on a limb, making his powers known to all who were at that wedding. Jesus shares the blessings of God's love in rich and lavish ways. So too are we called to do these things, to share the gifts that we've been given, to claim the name of Jesus publicly, and to be open to God's work in us and through us.

During this Lenten season and always we can do things the way we've always done them. We can observe our rituals in the ways we always have, with dim lights, candles, and soft music. Or we can invite others in, tell them the stories of what is going on, and celebrate the goodness of God as we share the party with them. I can testify from my experiences this last week, doing the latter provides a rich and meaningful way of understanding God; a God who invites us to join him and to follow the lead of Jesus as we share gifts with others and celebrate the life that we've been given.

May we all openly share stories of God's love and activity with others, even when we're reluctant to do so. May we all find ways to harness the power of God's life giving love and pour that love out to others. May we all be aware of the miraculous things that happen around us every day and testify to the extravagant love of God.