



Sermon

John 2:1-11
January 17, 2010
Second Sunday After Epiphany
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Wine Signs

But you have saved the best wine until now.

– John 2:10b, *The Message*

It seems strange to be talking about a wedding in the dead of winter. But then again, Jesus' guest appearance at a marriage ceremony in Cana is anything but typical. Speaking as one who presides at lots of weddings, there's one thing John's Gospel gets right: there's often more going-on at the reception than the church service.

Picture the scene. Two kids from Cana's best families tying the knot. The heat of the day is past. The last rays of the sun reflect light from the whitewashed walls of this little town. Tonight was special. There was a wedding. Rabbi Jesus, about whom there was no little buzz, was going to be there.

The reception was cookin'. Lots of noise. The wine is flowing as if from bottomless carafes. Funny, we have not heard word one about the bride and groom. Lord only knows what happened to them. Prankster in the wedding party let the air out of their tires. The groom's brother hid the car keys. They got delayed taking pictures. You know how weddings are.

We may not have heard word one about the newlyweds but the wedding guests? We know what they're doing: chowing-down cheese puffs, scallops wrapped in bacon and cocktail wieners. Washing it down with wine. Nobody is enjoying the festivities more than Jesus and his disciples.

By now the guests have grabbed their place cards, taken their seats and are kibitzing with folk they hadn't seen since the last family funeral. Socializing. Sipping wine. Eating crackers and

cheese. Sipping wine. Crunching fresh veggies and dip. Sipping more wine. But then the worst possible thing happens. THEY RUN OUT OF WINE.

Get this. There are still plenty of hors d'oeuvres, dinner isn't out of the kitchen and the wine is kaput. Can you hear the bride's mother? "Oh for heaven's sake! I'll never be able to show my face in this town again."

Ah, but then she remembers Mary. You know, her relative Mary. Mother-of-Jesus, Mary. Mother-of-Jesus-with-a-reputation-for-helping-people, Mary. "So, I'll ask Mary. What can it hurt," she says.

Word gets to Jesus about the situation. Finding there is no wine to be had anywhere, and at first a little testy, Jesus asks for six stone crocks to be filled with water. The servants could be heard muttering, "This guy isn't thinking these people are so tipsy they'll think this water is cheap white wine, is he?" But after all, they were servants whose livelihood depended on doing what they were told.

Amazing. Incredible. How could it possibly be? Carrying the filled-to-the-brim stone crocks, the water turns to wine. Bonafide fruit of the vine.

The servants, not knowing anything had happened, deliver the crocks – one hundred and twenty gallons worth – to the maitre'd. He takes a sip. Swishes it around in his mouth. Swallows. Sniffs the bouquet. Takes another sip. Then he takes a butter knife and clangs it against the side of his wine glass to get everyone's attention. "You know," he says, "I've been through a lot of

weddings. Usually you get just a little taste of the good stuff, the fine wine, and when that's finished, out comes cheap – oh excuse me – inexpensive, pedestrian stuff in gallon jugs. Ah! But your host has kept the best wine until now!"

As the guests raised their glasses, Jesus smiled. Not because of any self satisfaction at saving a wedding reception from leaving a bad taste in people's mouths, but in hopes that this wine sign might bring people to savor what God's grace holds in store.

It never says what happened to the bride and groom after that night. But it is safe to figure they enjoyed the taste of that water-turned-to wine for a lifetime. In the same way it is hoped the telling of this story brings us to taste and see a hint of God's surprising goodness. Label it "the best is yet to come." In love, by God's grace, spirits running low or the worst going down your gullet – the best is yet come.

The Gospel of John gives us this story of the wedding at Cana as the "first" of the signs that there is something divine going on with Jesus. A sign of what?

About the power of love, God's love and ours – how love works, love in marriage and also love in all kinds of relationships. Like water turned to wine, loving and being loved, caring and being cared for causes people to feel MORE THAN their plain old selves. People who feel loved feel LESS ordinary. People who feel loved and love have more energy. They believe they can accomplish anything and often do. They are more apt to believe no hurdle is too high. This is true because loving and being loved is about believing in each other – especially in empty and dry times. Those who feel loved feel more than their ordinary selves. Jesus first miracle points to this sign of a God who elsewhere, scripture says IS the definition of love.

Isaiah says this too, that God relates to people as in a wedding vow full of the best intention:

*You shall no longer be termed "Forsaken,"
or your land "Desolate,"
But you shall be called "My Delight"
and your land "Married."*

*For the Lord delights in you...
As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride,
so shall God rejoice over you.*

Isaiah 62:4-5 NRSV

Storyteller Anthony DeMello has one about a priceless antique bowl that brought a fortune at auction. It had been used by a tramp who died in poverty, unaware of the value of the bowl he used begging for pennies for years. In DeMello's story, the bowl is meant to represent you and me; how we focus on the penny knowledge we collect from others, the small change of their approval and applause. Yet, we, ourselves are the priceless vessel.

Another sign is in the very wine itself.

Granted wine is booze, potentially dangerous and drunk-making. (The voice is my head is my grandmother, who with the temperance Methodists of her time sang ditties like "Lips that touch liquor will never touch mine," and "We don't drink and we don't chew and we don't go with boys who do." Granted wine is booze, and potentially drunk-making. But another name for wine is "spirits," the presence of which, at a certain wedding reception in Cana is a rather splendid sign and symbol for another Spirit, with a capital "S," the same Spirit which made the first Christians at Pentecost spill out into the streets with verve and vigor not experienced since Jesus died, and, who, you'll remember, appear intoxicated before the bars were open.

It is God's Spirit that like wine, as it ages becomes more sumptuous. It is God's Spirit that matures into an aroma of grace, manifests a body of forgiveness and zest; it is God's Spirit which hopes and finds reasons for rejoicing in times when things aren't working.

"Wine makes the timid brave or at least not so shy," writes Frederick Buechner. "It makes the reserved stand up and shout, maybe even amorous. It can break the ice with a crackle and even make you warm all over when it's cold outside. And so what if you only use it for medical purposes, Hey! At least it kills germs. So as a sign and symbol of what God's spirit does, you've got to admit wine is a pretty terrific one."

I wonder when the couple from Cana reminisces about their wedding day and the sign of the wine, did they say to each other, "I thought we were finished before we even began."

Or in old age did they recognize this miracle as the first of many? Others, less dramatic but no less real: in their children, their personal growth and transformations, how their minds changed about people or things, the ability to stick with thing or with each other thru difficult times. Did they finally toast each other, remembering how scraping the bottom of the barrel, how even the dregs, yielded unexpected treasure?

How often we give up: decide God's love, God's care, God's grace – or ours – has run out. "It was good while it lasted," we'll say, "but now I have surely exhausted mercy or hope. This person will never forgive me. This situation will never change." We resign to drinking water.

But then it comes. An unexpected gleam in the cup, a rich ruby color, a sudden sweet taste. It isn't God who has changed. God is just being God. Surprising us. Maybe not when or how we expected it. But all things considered, not as long as the aging time a good vintage requires.

By God, there is always more wine.

On a weekend that remembers Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I'm thinking of words from one who was his inspiration: Mahatma Ghandi. "When I despair," Ghandi said, "I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. Oh, there have been tyrants and tragedies and disasters and for a time it feels as though they have the upper hand. But in the end they always fail. Think on this always."

Think on this always.

And on a Sunday when we are shocked by the horrors of the Haitian earthquake, people there are still digging loved ones and their very lives out of the rubble, we are invited to participate in this very miracle, by our gifts and support, turning a disaster into an outpouring, overflowing response of amazing grace.

Don't miss the signs in the wine.

■■■ Amen ■■■