



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 17, 2010

When the Wine Runs Out, Robert B. Culp

John 2: 1-11

Without any question, it is a strange story John shares with us this morning. As John tells it, it is the first of many signs by which the glory of Christ is revealed to people. In that respect, this is a tale that is shot full of the divinity of Christ the miracle worker, the one who draws others to his side by his marvelous signs. But the story is strange because as much as it reveals something of Christ's divinity, it also manifests his humanity. In fact, this story is quite wonderfully shot full of humanity.

To begin with, it is the story of Jesus the party-goer, which is about as human as it gets, right? Jesus the party-goer, the one who enjoys laughter and the delicious fullness of a wedding celebration. Now, as much as we Americans may think we know how to throw a wedding party, we don't hold a candle to the way they did it in first century Galilee. For weddings in Jesus' day were experienced as much more important than in today's culture, and not just because they went on for a week or so. Let me explain.

Imagine what it was like living in the household of a simple tradesman in a subsistence economy in the first century in a very poor part of the world ... quite similar to the abject poverty in Haiti. Everything about life in this time was incredibly "daily" for these people. Just imagine – no electricity, no running water, no refrigeration. Everything about the household had to be done for today, and then done again for tomorrow. Every day the women would gather at the well, and they would draw water for the family's needs for the day. Every day they would stop at the marketplace and get the foodstuffs needed for that day, because nothing kept. Every day they would prepare the meals, which seldom had any leftovers. Indeed, everything was "daily" in such a culture. And in such a culture, weddings were one of the few things that were about the future.

In contrast, think about our lives. Our lives are full of future plans, always pushing into tomorrow. We are scheduling for this week, next week, and well into the weeks and months

ahead, and we are noting all these events on our calendars, day-planners, and computer devices of all sorts. We are a tomorrow culture, a future-oriented culture. However, for the Galileans in Jesus' time there was only today. Nobody had a day-timer telling them what they were going to do in the coming spring or summer. It was all about today – except for weddings. Weddings provided the occasion for those little villages and the wonderful societies in those villages to proclaim, “There is tomorrow. There is a future for our village and our family. There is promise and hope and tomorrow.”

In a time before movies, basketball and PTA meetings, the most exciting event in small towns like Cana were weddings. After the ceremony, the bride and groom weren't whisked away to the airport in Tel Aviv to fly to the Swiss Alps for a honeymoon. Instead, the happy couple was paraded through the streets from the wedding ceremony to their new home. Then for seven days they entertained their families and friends. (I'm wondering – how would you like that the week after your wedding? Your spouse's family traipsing in and out of your house, with your having to clean up after them! Well)

Jesus and his friends are enjoying the wedding festivities. There is music, dancing, and plenty of food. People are hugging, smiling, telling stories, and laughing. But you know how weddings can be ... something inevitably goes wrong. The best man's tux is too big. The preacher's allergies act up. The bride has a bad hair day. I even had a wedding service where the groom fainted ... twice! Something has to go wrong. At this particular wedding Jesus is attending, the hitch comes at the reception.

The wine runs out. The story says that Jesus' mother goes to him at that point. She tells him there is a problem here, that the wedding party is in trouble, and the bride and groom are about to be humiliated and embarrassed because the wine has run out ... sort of like preparing a meal for six and having a dozen folk show up, or approximating the appetite of all your dinner guests only to have one person eat everything in sight! So Mary goes to Jesus, and says in effect, “Don't just stand there, do something!”

And Jesus responds, “What concern is that to you and me? It is not our problem, and it is not my time.” Now ... someone is in trouble. The host at the wedding was about to be humiliated. And Jesus' immediate response was – “Not now ... it's not our problem ... it's not my time.” It is a very human response, isn't it? We have all said something like that, and have all felt something like that. It is about as human as it can be, when a pressing need seems inopportune.

We don't know what took place after this little dialogue – perhaps a stern look from Mary, or the powerful impact of the lifting of a single eyebrow, or a tugging at the heart deep inside. But the story says that the next thing you know, about 150 gallons of water in 6 stone jars somehow become wine. And when the guests drink the wine of our Lord, they taste joy.

Of course, Jesus is not a magician. He's not doing some razzle-dazzle trick to garner applause. Rather, Jesus is revealing the joy God brings to us in the midst of our living.

It makes you wonder, doesn't it, what might the world have been like if the man, the human being, Jesus of Nazareth had stuck with his initial human response to the problem and said, "It is not my problem and it is not my time." What if there had been no water changed into wine that day, and what if the next day when he met up with the leper by the side of the road, Jesus had said the same thing? And the next day and the day after that, what if through the rest of his life in the face of human need he said, "It is not my problem and it is not my time."?

You know, something miraculous happens when somebody moves past the feeling that "it's not my problem nor my time" and becomes involved (Haiti). It has made all the difference in our lives that Jesus got past that feeling, that he paid attention to the needs around him, and that by his loving presence something quite ordinary was transformed into something quite extraordinary.

I love how the 17th century poet Richard Crashaw describes this wedding miracle in Cana. He writes, "The modest water saw its God, and blushed." In the poet's fanciful imagination, ordinary water became conscious in the presence of its Maker, its sovereign and master. The water blushed, overcome with awe, dazzled by recognition, changed by the sudden awareness of the Holy. Many times, that's how we react when we're in the presence of something that is overwhelmingly grand. We get excited, we become modest, we experience a rush of emotion, and we change. "The modest water saw its God, and blushed."

Let me tell another story, a story closer to our own time and appropriate to this holiday weekend. In the mid-1950's, Martin Luther King wrapped up his course work for his PhD, with his dissertation yet to be written. He left graduate school, and became pastor of a church in Montgomery Alabama. He was the father of a young family, and became immersed in the work of his first pastorate.

Not long after he went to Montgomery, Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. A meeting was held in the African-American community, and they asked who was going to lead the charge and head up the boycott. All the other pastors and influential leaders of the African-American community were smart enough to know that this looked like some pretty risky business. So, they decided to get the new kid on the block to lead the charge.

Dr. King had every reason in the world to say, "It is not the right time for me. I have a young family and a dissertation to write. I have a congregation that does not know me or trust me yet. If I start out at the head of this enterprise, what will that do to my relationship to my congregation? It is not a good time, not my time to be pushed out in front of such a dangerous endeavor." I wonder what happened that moved this very human being from saying "not my

time” to “yes” ... this man who taught us that gentleness takes more courage than violence, that human compassion is more valuable than any ideology, and that we should be governed by our dreams and not by our fears?

Well, those are the stories we hear on this Sunday morning and consider the question about what happens when the wine runs out or when human rights are trampled by prejudice or when we become overwhelmed and heartsick over the unimaginable tragedy and devastation that has taken place in Haiti ... and then consider what happens in people’s lives and our world when people begin to say “yes” instead of “it’s not my time.”

In this regard, I think about our church family at this particular time in the history of this congregation. Everyone here has been given, by a previous generation, the gift of this place and the diverse ministries embraced by this people of God. All of us benefit in special ways by what we have received from previous generations of members – their values and convictions, their dedication and commitment, their visions and dreams. And now all of you together as a family of faith have the privilege of being the generation that is called upon to see new visions and dream new dreams as you prepare the way for a new minister sometime in the future and for another generation in this century.

Yours is a wonderful, inspirational task as you seek to help people know God, to experience the Lordship and abundant life of Christ Jesus in their lives, and to make a redemptive difference in the world as God’s beloved children.

Sometimes we struggle with such a challenging task, perhaps with our calendars so full that we somehow neglect the simple joys of this very day and the opportunities we have every day to taste the goodness of life itself. Perhaps the problem is that – like Jesus or Dr. King – we may be tempted to say that it is not the right time for me, that I’m just too busy right now, that my family needs me, that it’s just not opportune for me to get involved.

But somehow we come to know God, and we come to know first-hand the experience of Christ’s love in the living out and doing of our faith – by saying “yes” to the beckoning call to serve and to become involved. People sitting on the sidelines can not experience the fullness, the mystery, the majesty of our Lord. For we come to know God and experience the living Lord when our hands are dirty; when we participate in worship and discussions, forums and mission endeavors of all sorts; when our lives ... our time ... our resources are involved in the ministry of Christ in the work of the church in the world.

You see, God’s presence is revealed day by day in pleasures large and small, in the joy of good food and good company, in the sounds of laughter and lively conversation, in efforts working for justice and peace and healing. Every once in a while ... perhaps at a wedding, at a family picnic or a pancake breakfast, perhaps rebuilding homes on the Gulf Coast or giving generously to assist in the tender needs in Haiti ... you catch a glimpse of God’s glory.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God, it will flame out” ... another poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins. “It will flame out.” The bush will be on fire. The water will become wine. Healing and wholeness and the rebuilding of lives will occur. God’s people will persevere and thrive through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: O Lord, any time you show up in our lives ... be it at an ordinary wedding at Cana, or in our ordinary church family in a time of transition, or tomorrow morning in our respective callings, or in a nation devastated by an earthquake ... any time you show up, things become transformed. And there is glory. And quite wondrously, in the light of such glory, despair turns to hope, doubt is transformed into belief, death is made into life, and water is changed into wine. Thanks be to you, in Jesus’ name. Amen.