

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany
17 January 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalms 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Today we continue our celebration of the Epiphany, the business of seeing God somehow peculiarly real, alive and embodied in the person of Jesus. Here is a guy who can do miracles, who can change water into wine. You know I have a problem with the mechanics of miracles, don't you? So I have to ask what's going on? Why is this miracle presented to us from the history and documents of the Church as Jesus' first miracle? What's going on? Let's start frankly: what's the sensitivity for anybody who's in a twelve-step program and dealing with addiction? Here we have a savior making more wine for drunk people. It's not really a good image. But I think there's more to it than that. I really do. I did listen to my buddy Frank this morning, and I think I stole an idea from him.

Here we have six stone water jars that start empty, by the way. It's Jesus who has them filled with water. The nature of stone is that it's cold and rigid, and into those cold and rigid stone containers Jesus directs water to be put. Now water gets rigid when it freezes as we know this morning, but the primary nature of water is that it's fluid and that it is a universal solvent, a universal cleanser.

I remember years and years ago in my first parish I had English guests who were expatriate living in Mexico. We were at breakfast and I had a spot of jam or something on the carpet. Those were the days when I was really way more obsessive/compulsive than I am now. I had all kinds of chemical cleaners and sprays and this thing wouldn't come out. And Elizabeth, God bless her, in her thick beautiful English accent said, "*Ronald, why don't you try soap and water?*" [laughter] It worked! [laughter]

So Jesus instructs those cold rigid containers which are apparently not leaking ... You know the word *sincere* that we use all the time. It really means "*It doesn't leak.*" It comes from two Latin words: *sine* which means "without" and *cera* which is "wax." In the days of clay pots, if there was a crack in the pot the pot sellers would fix it with wax which worked until you put hot liquid in it. [laughter] Then the wax melted and the pot leaked. So if the pot was without wax it meant it was a good pot, it was *sincere*.

So here are these sincere stone-cold rigid containers for the important substance of religion that Jesus encountered in his life, the religion of keeping oneself clean, the religion of purity, the religion of righteousness, the religion of keeping oneself clean by keeping oneself separate from others who were dirty, the religion of not helping the person who has been beaten up on the highway on the road to Jericho so that when I get to church I will be ritually clean. The religion of doing one's own righteousness is there in abundance.

Jesus is attending a wedding. You can only imagine in forty-one years of ministry the weddings I've attend, and you can only imagine what some of those parties have been like. *"It's no longer attractive to go because I can't hear the person next to me. The music's too loud, but the food is always good. The time is always great."* You know the German word for wedding is *Hochzeit* which means "a high time."

In the first lesson for today we get this whole business from Isaiah about being married. *"You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no longer be termed Desolate; you shall be called My Delight Is In Her, and your land Married."* These are the days when women had no value unless they were significantly connected to a man who provided income, care... Being married was important. *"As a young man marries a young woman, so shall the builder marry you. As a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."* Attempting to point to God's relationship to Israel, that God's relationship to Israel was a personal one. But Jesus inherits a religion in his day and time which has become rigid, cold. It contains the substance of the religious behavior, the universal solvent, the cleanser, and he does something with that.

At the wedding feast people have run out of that which is making them happy. They have run out of the elegant part of a festive meal which is a part of celebration known as wine. Have you ever seen what the royal table looks like at Windsor when it's set for a royal time? There is a cluster of about six glasses at every place, not because a great deal of wine is consumed but a different kind for every course. The glasses aren't large but the variety, the flavor, the aroma, the beauty of the fruit of the vine that has been cultured into the magic of wine is provided in a panoply at each table setting.

So Jesus says in addition to the water glass at the meal of your religion, I've got a better idea. Could we take the water that represents an impersonal, judgmental, law-bound, hypocritical, self-righteous kind of approach to God in religion which makes God into a testosterone-driven angry man in the clouds and make our relationship with God look more like a wedding feast so that religion - now this is radical, friends - so that religion might become more like a party - even a drunken party which is predicated on human relationships. That's what a wedding is about - human relationship - and those who come to celebrate, support and enjoy that relationship by extension with themselves. And so that which is necessary for life - and it cannot be denied that water is absolutely necessary for life. We had a discussion here yesterday at a funeral - the cremated remains were here - that cremation is really not a process of burning but evaporation. Most of the body is water.

So we have the business of water necessary for life but Jesus saying there is more to life than that, that life - religious life - can be delicious, filled with variety, pleasurable, complementary and joyful. It's not about substance but about relationship, and here's a wedding feast that had essentially run dry. When hasn't that happened to us? Where we have the water but we've run dry and our relationship becomes one of a religion contained in a stone-cold rigid structure that contains enough for life but not enough for joy, and enough for myself but not enough to share. I think Jesus is showing us the miracle of a new kind of religion. And he hasn't scrapped a thing. He has taken what was there and improved it in color, in flavor, in potency and

in purpose.

And so occasionally people will come to me and say, “*Why do we have to use that creed?*” Well, that’s a good question because a creed is filled with ideas that are how many centuries old? The creed comes from about 325 - 17 hundred years. I see the creed for us as the stone, rigid, cold jar that contains the substance of religion but it’s the substance of a growing and joyful faith inside of that structure that changes by the grace of God. Jesus could have broken the stone water jars. He could have spilled the water on the floor. But instead he takes that water and uses it to reinterpret baptism as God’s cleansing rather than we cleaning ourselves as a birth canal through which we are born as sons and daughters of God, as the rain of justice and righteousness and love that pours down on the earth from above, from God’s self alone.

Jesus invites us to believe that religion has something to do with a deep, joyful, happy relationship with a God who joins us in life so that our lives might be more like a wedding feast, a joyful...I’m not talking about addiction; don’t get me wrong...but a joyful drunken wedding feast where people are happy and made happy by being together because in being together they know, believe, teach and confess that when they gather God is with them also.

So now the next thing we will do in this liturgy will be to go to the altar, and guess what we’re going to pull out? Wine! I know Methodists use grape juice, but grape juice is just young wine. [*laughter*] We’re going to use wine and water. Now one of the interesting things in certain Catholic behaviors is something called a mixed chalice, and you’ll see it here. We’ll put wine in the chalice and then we’ll put some water in it - not a whole lot, just a couple drops. The question is asked, “*Why is that done?*” Well, there are lots of explanations, and we can make up our own, but one of the arguments I’ve heard is that in ancient times, especially in Rome, water was so bad it had to be cut with wine for whatever reason. Then of course there’s the biblical argument that when Jesus was crucified and a spear was stuck into his side, what came out? Blood and water. There’s also the possibility that those couple drops of water are reflective of the other great sacrament, baptism.

Maybe for today for our own purposes we could amplify the mixed chalice which you’ll see at the altar to an understanding of including Jesus’ first miracle, the first time the Church starts to understand Jesus as a revelation of God present in humanity and see that this is the water of our lives that Jesus turns into the sacramental wine of *his life* that we take into ourselves and by virtue of which we become his body in the world. We become the visitor at the wedding feast of this world. We become the miracle workers who take to those who have run out, more than enough and share it in joy because the miracle we believe and understand and express every day is the miracle of God is with us in our gathering, in our community, in our relationships and that we are blessed by God with the full richness of water jars filled, not just with water for the working of our own self-righteous religion, but the deep rich wine of God’s making for the pleasure and enjoyment of life in the world in which we live.

You know that over the centuries and particularly in the Church which has great difficulty getting along with itself - don’t we - the arguments about what happens at the communion. Well, you know all those fancy words that everybody trots out: transubstantiation,

consubstantiation... By the way, my friend Jack Elstad was here over New Year's and I had provided for our pleasure a bottle of Cherry Kijafa which is a Danish specialty wine. He said, "*You know the Danish Church in Edison used to use Cherry Kijafa for communion.*" I said, "*Jack, that's not the fruit of the vine!*" "*Yeah, but it's Danish.*" And we all know God's Danish, right? *[laughter]* Or at least Lutheran!

The point being... You all know the arguments: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, it's only a symbol. And we have a slew of names for the same thing, don't we? The Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, Communion, Eucharist, Sacrament at the Altar... Could it be that the spirit that's being talked about in 1 Corinthians this morning is what we believe, teach and confess is at work here and that as we gather around a simple cup of wine and a nibble of very unattractive bread that somehow we are fed inside ancient rigid stone-cold structures with a new and living water that is reflective of the tincture and flavor and work of God's hands, that somehow mysteriously draws us together to be and to become what it is we say we are eating and drinking, the very body and blood of Christ himself. So then our belief in the incarnation is not so much a belief about what happened two thousand years ago but a belief about what can, should, must, and ought to happen with *us* here and now today while we still draw breath.

Now, friends, that is a miracle! That's not presto-chango of anything else but you and me. And I do know this: we can change and be changed. And one of the things the Church could learn really well from Twelve Step programs is that if change is going to come it's going to come from God - call her what you will - and it won't happen by our volition without divine inspiration and presence. And so it is we remember on this Sunday in Epiphany that we see God in the miracle that changes the water of our lives into the wine of the Church and helps us to become the Body of Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.