SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“What the Servants Saw”* John 2:1-11

The Wedding at Cana is a wonderful story for a long list of reasons. For me, the first reason it is wonderful is because it is a story where Jesus is supposed to be just an ordinary guest who has come to enjoy himself. As most of us know, weddings like this were supposed to go on for more than a few hours than you and I are used to. In the ancient near east, a wedding celebration could go on for a whole week.

Another more important reason this story is wonderful is because something miraculous and wonderful happens. In this story—which is only recorded in the Gospel of John—Jesus performs the first sign of his glory, and he does this with hardly anyone seeing. Hardly anyone saw this miracle unfold…except the servants.

As I said, the thing I like most about this story is that Jesus is at Cana (probably) for a whole week to celebrate and relax at a wedding. Although he has already identified and gathered his disciples, in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ public ministry has not yet begun. So, this excursion to Cana was “free” time, or at least it should have been.

Unfortunately, something goes awry, and the wedding hosts suddenly run out of wine. This is a *huge* problem! It was not simply a matter of not having something for the guests to drink. Wine was much more than a drink. Wine was a symbol: it was a sign of hospitality. In the Bible, wine is often the sign of God’s bounty and the spiritual joy that God desires for God’s Divine-self, and the same joy that God offers to all creation.

So, to run out of wine was to fly in the face of those kinds of feelings and significance the people of that place and time had for it. It would have exposed the host to all kinds of shame and gossip. It was very nearly a scandal! At the very least, this would have caused the hosts’ neighbors to treat them poorly or condescendingly probably for the rest of their lives.

To be shamed and to lose honor was to lose standing in the community, and could have brought all sorts of economic implications for the family. To lose honor could cause others to stop having confidence in your word and your worth. These two important things—honor and shame—so hard to acquire the one, so hard to live down the other! I cannot emphasize too much how important it was to preserve the honor of these people; how important it was to keep oneself from shame.

So it is very much a blessing for the hosts that Jesus is a guest at this wedding! Or perhaps I should say that it was very fortunate that Jesus’ *mother* was attending the wedding, for it was she who goes to Jesus expecting him to do something.

Although he initially demurs when she seems to suggest he intervene, he *does* eventually relent, and very soon the wine is flowing freely again. And not just *any* wine, it seems Jesus has furnished the wedding with the most excellent vintage anyone has ever tasted. Indeed, it was glorious!

Glorious, indeed.

It was so good that even the wine steward was shocked: how amazing to bring out the really *good* wine *after* the celebration was well underway!

What the wine steward knows is that after the party has been going on for a while, after the guests have drunk toast-after-toast to the newly wedded couple…well, let’s just say that after a few toasts, the guests were no longer terribly discriminating about what they were drinking.

As the steward sips the new wine and looks upon the crowd, what he knows is that after an evening of drinking and merry making, few of the large gathering of wedding guests are even aware of what is being put in front of them. Most are too drunk with the ordinary wine to be able to appreciate the extraordinary. It is even possible that they would not have cared if they did.

What the Gospel of John is showing us is that the light of the world has come among them, and they do not have eyes to see it. They cannot even taste God’s goodness when it is on their tongue.

Of course, none of the guests—not even the wine steward—knows what has happened. None of them was in the kitchen when the problem began to unfold. They did not see, so they do not know how the servants scrambled behind the scenes looking for even one more drop of the old wine. They did not see, so they did not know how the host turned pale with dread and embarrassment when informed of the shortage.

They did not see so they do not understand Jesus’ first reaction when his mother came to him telling him about the misfortune that was about to befall the family. None of the other guests heard or saw what passed between them either. And of course, no one, not even the servants could see into his heart at that moment. They could not see his heart so full of a desire to lead God’s people into God’s ways.

Although he could see and understand their need, Jesus knew is that his life was not to be spent bending to human whim or desire. It was to be spent confronting human sin and lack of compassion—it was all serious business! As important as it was among the people to avoid such an embarrassing and therefore shameful experience, it was not a sinful thing to have run out of wine. No one was going to be physically injured. No one was going to die because of it.

That Jesus went ahead and changed the water into wine can mean for us at least a couple of things for us.

First, although Jesus has already told his mother that “it is not yet his hour” [v. 5], and even though he has seemed to shrug-off her implication that it is his duty to “fix” the situation, it also seems as though he does care about her request. It is important to her. So, it is important to him.

Second, as he looked out on to the crowd of friends eating, drinking, laughing, and feeling so good about life, and the life of the newly married couple, I cannot help but believe that this warmed Jesus’ heart, too.

In that time and place where life was often hard, this family and their friends had found some time and the resources to make a wedding and have a good time together. And perhaps, what Jesus also thought of was the way in which the Bible always writes about vineyards and wine when describing God’s bounty and spiritual joy.

Jesus brought that bounty and joy back into the feast. He brought the real presence of God into their midst, and he brought it in abundance. So, this business of turning water into wine, this first sign of his glory, this is a “little” salvation story. It is the first time that Jesus will save someone from shame and disgrace, and instead bring joy and goodness into our lives. It reveals his love for the human community, and is the first, small disclosure of his glory.

This is what the servants saw, and what the elites in the crowd missed. And this will come to be the pattern with Jesus: the powerful will be confused by him, but the lowly be privy to these sings of his glory, and they will be the first ones to receive his grace.

There is, of course, more to come. Much more—but this small giving of himself foreshadows the glory that is to come—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is the Christ.

Our good news in all of this is that the love and caring that Jesus brought into the world is still alive and among us. Although it is still often ignored or unrecognized, the good news is that it has never vanished, and never will, and we have evidence for this all around us.

Some of that evidence is in our own backyard—those times when we have, as individuals and as a church, welcomed and allowed the power and strength of the Holy Spirit to work through our lives.

I was reminded of one such way in which this has happened and is continuing to happen in our church. It is through our commitment to Family Promise.

Although the past two years have prevented us from hosting them the way we used to, we are continuing to work with them in the ways that are open to us. The Christmas gift cards are one of those ways, and once again, I would like to thank all of you for being so generous.

The meals that several of us have helped to cook and deliver are another good example.

However, there is more good news: our church is in dialogue with the Family Promise organizers, and we believe we will be able to contribute even more good work of supporting homeless families as they work and transition into permanent housing. We are hoping to once again house families here at our church. With the new COVID protocols in place, there will be much more to manage, the program will look different, but we are committed to it and making this happen.

If we were to compare what we are doing with the immensity of the problem of homelessness, it might very well seem like very little. What I hope you can see is that in a sea of darkness this is light, and a very bright one, indeed! This is a small bit of God’s glory that shines through to light the world of every man, woman, and child who is housed—even temporarily—and made safe.

And this is something that does not require a large, complicated plan, nor even substantial financial resources. Mostly what it takes is a heart that feels for and with those in need, and a willingness to be creative to do something new.

The servants saw all of this. They saw his glory before anyone else. And now we are his servants, and we are given the same invitation and opportunity to participate and experience God’s glory. We, as a church, have already identified Family Promise as one way to do this, but there are others, many others.

And so my prayer for all of us is that we will look for and welcome those opportunities, and that we will see and bask in Christ’s glory. And having done that, may we find more and more ways, and invite more and more people to join with us so that everyone may see and experience the glory that is life with Christ.

May this be so. Amen.