

“True Abundance”

A small community in California has a Strawberry Festival every year. Strawberries are the principal crop of that rural community and each spring when the berries are harvested the community has a big celebration. They always hang a banner across the main street that reads: “Strawberry Shortcake --- all you can eat”! Year after year the banner waved until one season when there was an unusual amount of heavy rains. The rain all but ruined the crop and there was a strawberry shortage. They went ahead with the festival anyway and a line was added to the banner strung across the main street that read: “Prunes Will Be Substituted for Strawberries.” Now prune shortcake was not a big draw!

A much better change takes place at a festival in today’s gospel lesson. At a wedding celebration in a small community called Cana, Jesus changes water into wine. Rather than go from something good to something not so exciting, like from strawberries to prunes, Jesus went from the ordinary (water) to something festive (wine). Clearly a change for the better! During this season called “epiphany,” we will hear scripture lessons that manifest ... reveal ... make known to us *who* Jesus is. The first *sign* (miracle) in the Gospel of John takes place at a wedding in Cana. It is a *sign* (miracle) that points beyond itself to greater news.

Jesus walks about in Galilee ... in the hinterland ... walking out among the people. Jesus does not begin his ministry in Jerusalem at the Temple attempting to prove himself as the Messiah with such miracles (signs). Jesus begins his ministry in a small town, among ordinary people, at a festive event. Interestingly, the first sign of changing water into wine was a well known occurrence among pagans. In fact, the feast of the Greek god Dionysus, who reputedly turned water into wine, was celebrated on January 6 ... the same day on the Christian calendar that we celebrate Epiphany the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ.

Obviously the gospel writer John interprets this event in the ministry of Jesus as a means to show how the coming of Jesus is a change for the better. “Water” which was used in the Old Testament as a means for purification and cleansing, is changed into the “wine” in the Gospel. Wine is symbolic of blood (life) and is used as one of the elements in Communion as a reference to the blood of Christ shed on the Cross. John uses the wedding at Cana as Jesus’ opening *sign* to point to the newness ... the change being brought about by Jesus. “Wine symbolizes a change for the better: from the old to the new ... from the lifelessness of Law to the liveliness of the Gospel ... from the ordinary (water) to the extraordinary (wine) ... from the uninteresting to the exciting.”

As in so many of John’s accounts of Jesus’ ministry, reality explodes ... cracks open once Jesus arrives. More things are happening here than a wedding or a shortage of wine. We must not become lost in the story. With Jesus on the scene, there are various levels of meaning. In this sign we are confronted with what happens in the world when Jesus appears, because when Jesus arrives on the scene, water becomes wine! When Jesus is accepted as Savior, there is a transformation of one’s life, and such a change is always for the better. That is to say, when one attunes their life to the will of God ... as nearly as possible ... the changes that come about are for the best for that person.

Each of us have experienced and will continue to experience difficult changes in our life: having children, loss of job, illness or death, divorce, financial difficulties, relocation, retirement, etc. We want good or better changes and strive to bring them about. Some times we are successful and some times not! What is certain from today’s lesson is that Jesus is an *agent of change* ... wine is made out of water. Something new was made out of something old. The presence of Jesus in one’s life ... the presence of Jesus in the life of a community or event ... transforms that life or that event.

During Jesus’ time, *hospitality* was always a sacred duty. That day social embarrassment and shame would have come to that family, if the wine had run out. It was, in part, to save a humble Galilean family from hurt that Jesus put forth his power. Jesus’ actions were motivated by sympathy, kindness and understanding the needs of simple folk. We, too, can show that we are followers of Jesus Christ by such deeds of sympathy, understanding, and basic simple kindness.

Mary O’Connell, author of *Keeping Your Head Above Chaos*, writes: *I watched it happen at our house one recent Sunday. Weather was cool and rainy, had been for some days, and people were frustrated about not being able to get out and enjoy the weekend. The preceding week had been exceptionally busy, demands of school and work and assorted other projects had rendered everyone tired and crabby. A couple of unsettled issues clouded the air. Building onto them were those irritating little details, like who messed up the bathroom or whose turn it was to set the table. By the time we sat down*

to eat, the air was thick with trouble. It only took one small nudge --- a smart remark by little brother, a touch of parental sarcasm --- for the dinner to dissolve into anger and tears. I sat afterwards among the half-eaten salad and cold potatoes musing about how little energy it takes to destroy and how much energy takes to sustain. I lacked the energy, imagination, humor --- whatever it would have taken --- to rise above the situation and stop it from disintegrating into chaos.

It is from such potentially chaotic life situations or disasters that Christ can rescue us. Perhaps grace before such a meal as just described could have helped “turn water into wine.” Christ-like attitudes and practices will usually do the job. When Jesus arrives, water is changed into wine. For example, the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. often flirted with chaos. However, he employed the nonviolent way of Jesus and “turned water into wine.” At one potentially explosive Chicago City Council meeting, the Rev. Willie Barrow prefaced the session with a prayer that began: “Lord come down into these seats because we need you here tonight.” It calmed down the tumultuous situation and “turned water into wine.”

When and where there is a need ... when and where there is a shortage ... the presence of Jesus fills the void. Transformation ... changing for the better ... is the underlying root purpose of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus makes something out of something else ... makes something new out of something old. God’s creativeness works in just this way. “Fishers of men” were made out of fishermen. Paul was made out of Saul. Jesus, who fashioned himself after God, also fashions his followers ... changing water into wine ... sinners into saints ... the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In our day when people are so *impressed* by big things, large numbers, wealth and power, fame and fortune, and so *oppressed* by the great problems of war, hunger, sickness, and crime ... it is paradoxically significant and particularly refreshing that Jesus’ first demonstration of divine power took place at a rather common wedding reception. The same Christ, who refused to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger, did not hesitate to convert water into the further enjoyment of a crowd of merrymaking guests. This event in the life and ministry of Jesus says some important things to us.

For one thing, it reveals that the glory and splendor ... the power and the might of God ... are available and applicable within the ordinary, commonplace, mundane circumstance of everyday living. The Apostle Paul writes, “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (*I Corinthians 10:31*). And in another letter, he writes: *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me ... And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

What this all means is that the Christ who came at Christmas has come to manifest his presence and glory in the most commonplace events of our daily life. It means that the commonplace tasks need no longer be common or mundane. Whether they are within the realm of tedious housework ... the drab duty of selling merchandise or running an office or working in a factory or teaching a group of rowdy children ... the presence of Christ blesses and clothes everything with prestige and purpose. Jesus works miracles in our most ordinary circumstances, and thereby transforming the day’s drudgery and routine into a vehicle of blessing and abundance ... true abundance ... for us and for others around us. Jesus Christ, who without pomp and ceremony, created the best wine of the feast after the natural, ordinary supply was consumed ... gives to us ... if we will but receive it ... a wine which will supply our needs long after our natural and human resources are exhausted.

When Jesus left the wedding at Cana, he still had a long way to go on his journey. There would be less glorious moments for him ... times when he would be rejected, humiliated, and misunderstood. His final hour would be the Cross. The glory of his first miracle at Cana did not change that. Yet, that sign ... that glory enabled Jesus to continue ... a sign that God would not abandon him to the darkness and death. Likewise, when you leave here today, there will be less glorious moments for you in your life. Sunday worship does not change the difficulties of the upcoming weeks, months or years. In truth, when you leave here, you go out into a world in which hope is in short supply. Yet, sometimes when you leave here, you feel quite different than when you came. Perhaps the singing of a hymn, the reading and hearing of God’s word, or the fellowship of a faith community changes you.

The veil between you and God, between today and eternity, is drawn back. Here in this church ... as at the wedding in Cana ... Jesus is revealed as Lord of history ... as master of all. For one stunning moment, there is glory. We do not have to wait to the end of the story for the glory. Anytime Jesus shows up, be it at an ordinary wedding, or our ordinary church, or tomorrow morning while you are at work or at school or at home, or anywhere ... when Jesus shows up, things are transformed ... changed. There is glory! And in the light of such glory, despair turns to hope ... doubt is transformed into belief ... death is made into life, as water into wine. During the tenure of my pastorate, I have seen it numerous times happen just this way. It is a miracle! And do you know what? Think about it! So is your life! Amen.