

I love visiting Civil War battlefields. A few weeks ago during Christmas break we took a rather long scenic detour between family in Ft. Worth and family in Austin to see a battlefield I've always wanted to see—Vicksburg, Mississippi. When you visit a battlefield like Vicksburg, you see lots of statues, lots of monuments. Without those markers, all you'd see would be a big field, some trees, and some hills. But all of those markers are there as if to say, "Don't be fooled. This is no ordinary field. Something important happened here." Even if you didn't know the first thing about American history, the monuments, the statues, the gravestones, would be signs that something important happened here.

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the signs, we celebrate the events the point to the reality of who Jesus really is. The theme of Epiphany is, "Don't be fooled. This is no ordinary man. Look at the signs. Something important happened here."

Today our Gospel lesson is one of the classic Epiphany readings, the Wedding at Cana, John ch2 (bulletins). Earlier in ch1, in the introduction to his Gospel, John told us that "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." Now, in ch2, John begins to tell us the first way that Jesus' glory is revealed. And John does so in his typical fashion. His account is bursting with symbolism. And, as he is telling the story, he is also telling us much about living the Christian life.

John ch2 v1 "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding."

Cana was just over the hill from Nazareth, just 5 miles away. Apparently, Jesus and his mother had some kind of connection with a family there. Maybe they're friends. Maybe they're relatives. But for whatever reason, Mary and Jesus go to the wedding, and his disciples tag along.

Now when you think of a wedding in the gospels, don't think of a modern American wedding, with a service that lasts somewhere between 15 minutes and an hour, followed by a 3 hour reception. Instead, a 1st century Jewish wedding was a week long party, a seven day feast. The groom's family would scrimp and save for years to be able to buy enough food and wine so that the party would last the whole week. Sometimes guests would bring additional food and wine as wedding gifts.

Which brings us to v3: "The wine gave out." Major faux pas. Humiliating. A wedding that runs out of wine. It would have been a major social embarrassment.

So end of v3, Jesus' mother pulls him aside and says, "They have no wine." Jesus tells her, v4 "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" It's actually a little bit of a slap on the wrist. Jesus is saying, 'You're bringing this problem to me, but it's not my problem. Besides, it's not the right time yet.' Yet Mary says to the servants, v5 "Do whatever he tells you."

There are a couple of wonderful things here. They're very instructive for us.

First, Mary comes to Jesus with a problem. But she doesn't propose a solution. She says simply, 'They've run out of wine.'

Second, she just trusts him to handle it. She says to the servants, "do whatever he tells you."

I can't help but thinking, how different my prayer life would be if I could do those two things. Mary presents a problem. Then she stops. I present a problem. Then I proceed to inform God as to exactly how he should proceed in solving my problem. I basically swagger into God's presence and say, "This is the way it needs to play out. A. B. C. God. Make it so."

"Lord I want you to help. And I want you to do it my way."

Sometimes, thankfully, God doesn't do things the way I want. And sometimes, I get what I want, but then I find out it's not really what I want. It's as if God is saying, "Okay. We've done it your way. Now let's try it my way."

How much better it would be if I could always say. "Lord. Here it is. Help." That's the way Mary presents the problem to Jesus.

And second, she trusts the outcome. She tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do." That's a wonderful attitude of trust/faith/belief. I don't know what'll happen. But whatever God says, do it. It may not be what you want or expect. But do it. Follow him.

How much better would our spiritual lives be if we could do those things? Bring our problems honestly to God. And then trust him for the best outcome. Mary is a wonderful role model here.

v6 We're told that there are six stone water jars there. They're used for Jewish rites of purification. They each hold twenty to thirty gallons.

And Jesus says, v7 "'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim."

Notice also that the jars were empty. They'd run dry. The needle was on 'E.' They were waiting to be filled again. And in walks Jesus. With Jesus, the jars are filled to the brim.

How about you? Is there any emptiness in your life? Is your life anything like the six stone jars? Once it was full, but now it seems dry and empty.

Truth is, there's always something missing in life. There's a void that can't be filled by others, not even those you love.

We Americans try to fill that void with many things, whether it's work or working out, substance abuse or sex or stuff. We try so hard to fill the void. It's our great national pastime. But that brokenness can only be healed, that emptiness can only be filled by God. And with Jesus, John tells us, the jars can be filled to the brim.

Also, notice what these jars are used for: Jewish rites of purification. The wedding guests were washing up so that they would be worthy to enter the marriage feast. But now, the jars are empty.

There's a heavy message here. John is telling us that the Jewish religion up to this time was incomplete. That doesn't mean it was bad. It just needed fulfilling.

Jesus wasn't destroying the old and bringing in the new. Jesus was taking the old, refilling it, and transforming it. Jesus was working within the Jewish system to bring about what was promised in the Law and the Prophets. That's John's symbolism here. The jars that allowed people to prepare for the feast were empty. Jesus refilled them. Then Jesus transforms them.

v8 After the jars are filled, Jesus tells the servants to take some to the steward, and by v9, John tells us, almost as an aside, that the water was now wine. Now think about that for a second. Six stone jars at 20 to 30 gallons apiece means 120 to 180 gallons of wine. Now I've been to some wild parties in my time. But I've never been to a party with 120 to 180 gallons of wine. That's 600 to 900 bottles. That's 2400 to 3600 glasses. An enormous amount of wine.

Through Jesus, God provides abundance, more than is ever needed. You know. There is one other time in John's gospel where Jesus provides an abundance of stuff. It's in the feeding of the 5,000, with an abundance of bread. Abundance of bread, abundance of wine, hint, hint, hint.

And when Jesus gives you wine, it's not cheap stuff. This is not Mad Dog 20/20. Look at v10. The steward goes to the groom and compliments him. 'Everyone else serves the good stuff first,' he says. You serve the microbrew beer first, then you pull out the Busch or the Lone Star after no one cares anymore. You serve the wine in the small bottles with the corks before you unscrew the lid on the big jugs. 'But you, you saved the best stuff until last.'

Of course, the groom didn't do it. At least not the bridegroom who was getting married that day.

Instead there was another bridegroom. Our bridegroom, Jesus Christ. He provides the true feast. And he saves the best for last.

We so often look backwards. We often long for the better days of the past. Yet at Cana, Jesus is letting us know, the best is yet to come. You ain't seen nothing yet. We get a little taste of it now. We will taste it in all it's fullness at God's heavenly table.

Remember that little detail back in v1. All of this took place on the third day.

John is subtly reminding us of something else that happened on the third day: the Resurrection. It's a big neon sign: Look out. This miracle is a foretaste of the great miracle that is to come. It's all about new life. This wedding party is a foretaste of the wedding supper of the Lamb. In the midst of the ordinary, God is doing something extraordinary. In the midst of mundane life, God is bringing new life. So be prepared.

This May at St. Paul's we're ending our first century of ministry and beginning our second. And we're doing so amidst a time of tremendous change.

As Bishop Mayer mentioned last week, the Christian church in our time is undergoing the greatest stress and ferment and change since the Protestant reformation 500 years ago. And most of us at St. Paul's will live the rest of our lives ministering and working in the midst of that change before things shake out and settle down. Maybe when I'm old and retired I can catch a glimpse of the way things will be. But it's likely that only the youngest children in our midst will see the settled pattern of what the church will be for the next half-millennium.

Coupled with that, there has been a seismic shift in the relationship between the Christian church and western culture. For 1700 years, from the time of the Emperor Constantine in Rome until the latter part of the 20th century, being a citizen of a western nation meant that you were almost automatically a Christian as well. This is no longer the case. Even in my childhood in west Texas, I remember Sundays and even Wednesday evenings being off limits to school functions, youth sports, and other similar things. No more. There is no longer a tacit "no compete-clause" between the culture and the church.

One pair of theologians even have a partially tongue-in-cheek date for the ending of that 1,700 year period of cooperation between Western culture and Christianity. It fell apart they say one Sunday afternoon in 1963 when the theater in their hometown in North Carolina started showing movies that competed with Sunday evening church services.¹

In a very real way, that means that the cultural context in which St. Paul's on the Plains ministered for it's first 50 years began to change radically during the next 50 years. And, as we begin our second century of ministry, we'll have to do so in a very different context, in a culture that increasingly describes itself as spiritual, but not religious.

In some ways, we're like those 6 stone jars. Things that have been helpful and useful have run their course. The jars are now empty. They could use refilling. They could use transforming.

Fortunately, we worship the God of new life, the God of transforming power. And God has much for us to do at St. Paul's in our second century.

An angel once said, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." We are invited. We are called. We are called to gather, and to share bread and wine. We are called to taste the abundant new life that God provides for us now. And we are called to be open to God's transformation, so that we may serve him more deeply, more fully, more faithfully.

Let us look backward with thanksgiving. And let us look forward to the new things God has in store for us.

¹ Hauerwas & Willimon, *Resident Aliens*

God can give us more than we'll ever need.
And God is saving the best for last.

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