

SAVING THE BEST FOR LAST

John 2: 1-11

If you had to describe the best moments, occasions and times of your life, times when you have felt most fulfilled, grateful and happy, what would they be? Well, we can describe places we have travelled to and the people we have been with. We can point to achievements, accomplishments and milestones in our lives and in the lives of our children. But I bet those and other times would be shared around a table and within a space where we are eating and drinking, sharing and laughing, relaxed, at ease... Or we are most fully alive engaging and interacting with people we feel at home with and those we think of as genuine friends and family. Whether this is at home, at a restaurant, a reception hall, a church hall, it is at times of celebration – at a wedding, a high holiday, a birthday party, a graduation, after a birth or a baptism, even a celebration of life when a life has been lived to the full and many seeds of love planted among those gathered... that's when life feels truly fulfilled.

In Jesus' day in northern Palestine, in a region called Galilee, most everyone lived a life where surviving day to day and year to year was all people expected. Those with any power and means were in it for themselves and anyone who dared to want more out of life was scared and shamed out of any expectations for themselves and their families other than surviving. But there were times and occasions that were exceptional: weddings. And weddings were times of hope: hope that even as marriages were arranged, there would be some love that would rise up between the partners, hope that the man in the partnership would treat the woman with respect, kindness and appreciation, hope that there would be children out of the partnership, hope that there would be laughter amidst the tears and times of celebration amidst the grinding and grieving of life day to day and year to year.

In fact, wedding celebrations were the one time when people could and would go all out, when workers were allowed to take time off, when the whole community could come together and take some sabbath time. Wedding celebrations in ancient Galilee would last a full seven days to mark the seven days of creation. There would be a break from work. There would be rich food and copious amounts of wine supplied throughout. There would be lots of toasts and blessings offered. And so, it is no wonder that in the bible heaven is often pictured as one uninterrupted time of celebration with friends and loved ones, with plenty to eat and drink. People are relaxed, at peace with little to fear or worry about, sharing lots of laughter and love.

And this is very important for us to understand in order to appreciate how the gospel writer John crafts the story that is our gospel lesson. Many of us have heard this story before, how Jesus miraculously turns water into wine. I can't tell you how many times I've been invited to

do the same as a minister – turn water into wine, that is 😊. Wouldn't I be a superstar minister! Imagine the commercial possibilities for the church! Seriously, though, the focus of a more literal reading of this passage is the supposed miracle of Jesus turning water into wine. If anything proves that Jesus is the divine Son of God it is his power to perform miracles like this.

But you know, this totally misses where the real message is. While the other gospels call the amazing things Jesus does “miracles”, John has the luxury of writing his gospel account later than the others and seeing how hearers and readers of those gospel stories could so easily miss what Jesus is trying to communicate with what he does. And so, John calls the remarkable healings and doings of Jesus “signs.” A sign is intended to communicate something and to point to something. ‘Don’t get sidetracked by the thing itself. Go deeper. Look at what it’s pointing to. Discover the real treasure hidden beneath the surface. Don’t get stuck in the surface literal. Ponder the deeper metaphorical.’

OK, preacher, so what are we talking about here. What sign are we looking for behind and beneath the turning of water into wine?

Once we read the word sign, it invites us to reread the story and look for some clues. Oh my goodness! The first four words of the story: “On the third day...” Readers of John’s gospel account know the larger gospel story in outline. Why does this particular episode begin this way - calling the day of the wedding “the third day?” In the previous chapter there is the first day when Jesus is baptized by John with the Holy Spirit descending on him, launching his vocation as messiah of God. Then there is the second day when he calls his first disciples. And now, we get to the third day which is a wedding celebration with seven days of feasting. Is the third day a sign of Easter, of the resurrection, of the new day of the rest of their lives? In the very next chapter John will be telling Nicodemus about rebirth and about eternal life which begins here and now well before physical death, so that death no longer becomes the end but a transition into an eternity that is far greater than earthly life alone... So then, careful readers of this story will catch this first clue. Even before this story begins, we are being told it is the third day. We are being invited to expect something of Easter, of resurrection, something that evokes thoughts of eternal life. Wow! Ok. So what comes next?

Well, we’re told that the third day is all about the celebration of love. God’s kingdom is all about sharing love. You share love with laughter, where people are celebrated not shamed, and loved not abused. You also share love with tears, tears of joy but also tears of love that heal the grief and the hurt. But physically, there is also need for food and drink, rich and plenteous food and drink. Imagine poor peasants on a limited diet of basic grains, vegetables and occasionally a little meat, having seven days of feasting with rich food! Think about us even today with the high cost of living and how many cannot afford decent food at their local grocery store. Any celebration that is of love is about our bodily fulfillment as much as our spiritual fulfillment.

And wine... wine especially represents life because it is also the colour of blood which is life. There has to be wine and lots of it if it is any celebration worthy of the name. So what does it mean when the wine runs out? Does it mean not only the end of celebration but the very end of life?...

So, Jesus is trying to enjoy himself with his friends, but it is his mother who rings the alarm bells. Somehow she knows something about Jesus no one else does, and something Jesus himself is not yet ready to share. And yet because it is his mother asking, and in fact telling him to do something, Jesus decides to declare his mission, to express his vocational destiny as messiah, in code. It is a sign remember? He tells Mary "my time has not yet come." The time is not yet ripe for him to actually live out his destiny, to "reveal his glory." But he will offer a sign which, by the end of the story, the disciples figure out. What about us readers? Too bad fundamentalists have taught us to get stuck in the literalism of the miracle and miss the deeper meaning of the sign!

Anyhow, it's not simply that Jesus makes new wine, signifying new life. He makes even better wine than before, signalling that the new life of Easter day, of resurrection, of eternal life which begins here and now, the new life of the rest of our lives if we entrust ourselves to it, this can be far better than any life we've had before. Isn't this something?

And not only this. Jesus is very deliberate as to what he uses to make wine. We're told this: "Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons." These jars would be filled with water and used by the community at particular times of the year as a ritual of cleansing and washing away of sin. You see, the people were taught that their desperate poverty, their harsh subjugation by foreigners and the contempt of their own religious authorities were all deserved because they were sinners. Guilt and shame meant they deserved their sorry state of a life. A wedding celebration was the one time where they could forget all the negativity and imagine a life full of love shared and enjoyed.

So, not only has the wine run out signalling the early end to the celebration. But Jesus asking for the empty pitchers to be filled with water would indicate that the end of the celebration also signals the need for purification, for cleansing, for atonement because of sin. 'Back to the misery everyone and back to being reminded of how we are living the consequences of being sinners before God. The celebration is over.' And yet, this is not what happens! Jesus not only turns the water into wine, but into wine better than before. That's what Easter is all about. New life and life even better than before... if we can imagine such.

So what would such new life look like? In John's gospel account Jesus refers often to "eternal life." Once again, fundamentalist readings have imprisoned these words to simply mean life after death. That's not what Jesus means by eternal life. Very clearly in the gospel Jesus is saying that

eternal life begins here and now, on the third day. Eternal life here and now in this life turns death into a transition rather than an end. Eternal life which we begin to taste in this life like new wine, will continue in the life to come when we will gather to celebrate with our loved ones who have gone before us to that uninterrupted celebration with Jesus at the head of the table.

But eternal life also means that we are made for celebration now. We are made for love now. The sign Jesus performs at the very beginning of his ministry on the third day of his coming out as messiah is a declaration that the oppression of the people through guilting and shaming which keeps them stuck in hopelessness and self-condemnation must be broken if healing is to begin to happen. People need to be liberated to celebrate not only in limited times, but all times. Whenever love is shared out in the fields, in the shops, on the street, among neighbours, between spouses who become lovers and friends who become caring companions, eternal life, resurrection life, easter is coming to be. It begins now and continues in the life to come. Why wait for the flourishing of love later? Begin to open your heart to it now. God is love, God is forgiveness, God is keen to celebrate you so that you can more readily celebrate others too. We are made for this, we are created for this, and we are called to invite all of creation to be part of it, from the food and drink we take in, the enjoyment of life around us with all our senses, and our inner spiritual fullness in gratitude for the gift of it all.

Wow! All this from one sign?! Sure, it would be great to turn water into wine, seriously. Imagine! But imagine if we could turn more of life and our lives into a celebration of the wine of love? Celebration doesn't mean there aren't times of sadness and hardship too. Life is like that inevitably. What it does mean, though, is that the ground beneath our feet is all about love, and love is only love and felt internally as love when it is shared and celebrated even when tears are involved too. There will be many tears in the story of Jesus all the way to and through his terrible death on a cross. But love must rise up and win on the third day. Has the third day come for you yet? What does it look like for you? How may all you have received and all you have to give become a sign of love for others? How may you turn water into wine through the love-energy of Jesus flowing through you?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for Easter hope. Thank you for our hope in a third day. Thank you for celebrations when we have known love and felt fully alive. Come to us especially if we are passing through more of a Good Friday right now in our lives than an Easter Sunday. Give us faith and hope that eternal life is yet possible no matter how distant or impossible it can feel... Amen.