

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Debbie Phillips at Grace Church in Salem*

Epiphany II Year C

Wedding in Cana

The gospel reading for today is one I commonly use at weddings. At the beginning of my remarks, I usually talk about how this marriage had to be between 2 Episcopalians, as the amount of wine consumed was about 120 gallons.

When I was in Cana a few years ago with Bishop Harris, we visited the site of the miracle. Cana is a pretty town in Galilee, the part of Palestine where Jesus spent most of his life. Of course, all the merchants there today try to sell you their wine. I tasted some and, no offense to the vintners, I think it was left over from the wedding.

As a child, I found this story fascinating. Jesus takes something as common as water, water that is used for washing, and changes it into wine. And, not just ordinary wine, but wine far superior to that originally served.

This is Jesus' first recorded public act. He's baptized and called God's own. He immediately enters the desert for his 40 days of temptation. While there, John the Baptist is telling everyone about him and this baptism. When Jesus returns, he already has followers, thanks to John, people who want to be with him.

Three days after returning from the temptations, he attends his cousin's wedding feast. While there, the wine runs out. Not much is worse than a lack of hospitality in this situation. But Jesus seems disinterested in this problem. Even he may not realize that this may be the beginning of his public ministry. However, as a result of all that pondering in her heart that Mary does about Jesus, she jumps into action. Mary knows that this is the time. This is the perfect occasion.

But Jesus isn't sure; he sizes up the situation. Standing under the trees, covered with fresh leaves are the 6 large water jars. As people enter the area, they first stop and pour water on themselves. Jesus goes over and tells the servers to begin using the water in the jars. As they pour, they see that it has become wine. All remark how generous the host is, saving the best for last. As the evening wears on, word spreads about the miracle and their cousin, Jesus. Not just the water has changed. The natural order of things has changed as well.

When the people of Israel were awaiting a Messiah, they expected a triumphant entry of power that would avenge all their enemies and raise them to their proper place in history. This did not happen. Jesus did not come onto the scene as a powerful ruler. Jesus never vanquished anyone, only death. Instead, Jesus came to announce a new beginning, a new era. Jesus came to be a sacred agent for change. He came to make the ordinary holy. Rather than destroying, Jesus transformed. Jesus came to remind us that we have a role in this too. We are also to be agents of change.

This miracle signals the beginning of communal transformation. The setting is ideal: two people celebrating their promises to each other in a public arena. Two people, two families really, embarking on a new life, one that will forever change them. Within this context, Jesus embarks on his own ministry, one that will forever change mankind.

It is significant that Jesus didn't just magically produce more wine. Instead, he takes what is already there and changes it so that it meets the needs of the people. This is what we are to do too. We can take the ordinary in our lives and with God's help, make it extraordinary. Sometimes, our lives feel like a big ole' jug of water, tasteless and drab. But with God's blessing, we become vessels of the most exquisite wine. God changes us into people fit for his kingdom. But, this only happens if we ask, for God does not make us change. God lets us choose between either running out of wine, or creating something finer.

This miracle is not performed for Jesus' benefit, but for our own. People whose cups were empty are now drinking to overflowing. The host is beaming, for his friends are satisfied. This is true of change made for the kingdom of God. Our ordinary lives are made extraordinary to be used in the service of others. This is how we become agents of change. This is how new creation is brought to its fullness.

This is a powerful story of redemption. It teaches us how necessary we are for change to happen. It tells us that a new era has begun where things will be blessed. It shows us how change must take place for a universal good, not for personal reasons. If water can be miraculously changed into wine, imagine how we will be transformed today when we eat the bread and drink the wine.

During this season of Epiphany, this season of manifestation, Jesus is shown to be an agent for transformation. May we see the signs in all moments of our lives; when we are called to be agents for the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Amen.