

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 2:1-11

January 14, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

1 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

4 "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come."

5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.^[a]

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

11 This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

My parents don't drink. Growing up, I never witnessed either of them take a sip of alcohol. My first memory of alcohol was of a huge bottle of *Galiano*—a mammoth thing of the late 70s with wicker wrapped around the bottle neck—at Sharon Selmek's, a teaching colleague of my dad's, apartment. But, Sharon Selmek was an anomaly, a constant source of intrigue for my brother and me and so it wasn't surprising to us, though it did make quite an impression on us, that she should have a huge bottle of booze. She also had two Siamese cats (we had a cocker spaniel), she had long fingernails (ours got clipped every Saturday night), she smoked cigarettes (so did the devil), and—the biggest shock of all to my four year old self—she polished her toe nails. My mom never used any kind of nail polish and so a woman's toe nails being red was akin to a man's face being blue—absolutely unheard of in my "Leave It to Beaver" world. And so that Sharon Selmek drank alcohol was just part of the mystery that surrounded her. And it wasn't as if my parents were out spoken or condemning of the use of alcohol, after all they did hang out with Sharon Selmek, they just didn't, and still don't, like the taste of alcohol. But still, their quiet abstinence led my young mind to think that there must be something bad about drinking alcohol.

And if their quiet abstinence didn't speak quite loudly enough to me on the topic, then my grandma's outspoken position on abstaining from liquor certainly did. She wasn't, and isn't, shy about making her feelings about alcohol known. I have heard her say, on more than one occasion, that Prohibition was a good idea that just wasn't given enough time to take root. I grew up hearing her harp about the "hoodlums" in the city park who sat back on the picnic tables drinking beer. Sometimes she'd even call those hoodlums in the park "winos" though they were far from bums on skid row, more likely just high school kids skipping algebra and sneaking a few sips of beer from a can they stole from their dad. And if you're thinking that Grandma's opinions on the evils of alcohol have, with age, mellowed like a 1945 Chateau Lefite Rothschild, you're mistaken. Because it wasn't even a year ago now that she started to offer a neighbor a ride home from the grocery store but upon seeing the six-pack in his hand, rescinded her offer. Grandma would never think of transporting alcohol across Main Street.

And though my parents, to this day, say they worked hard to not create anti-alcohol-drinker sentiments in us, I guess that with a Grandma like ours, it couldn't be helped. And to this day,

though I am 32 years old, gainfully employed, a homeowner, wife, and mother, I still have the sense that I'm getting away with something naughty when I imbibe. It's a judgment that is so deeply instilled—though surely not distilled—in me that I'll likely always carry a hint of it with me.

And with all of that tee-totaling personal history, you can imagine why this passage from John's gospel has always caused me a good deal of cognitive dissonance. After all, in my world, good people didn't drink. I thought that perhaps Jesus was confused when he turned water into wine, after all, it was his first public miracle and maybe he just got the details confused. I thought that perhaps Jesus' mother Mary—who pushed him into performing the miracle in the first place—was one of those winos Grandma had cautioned us against. I thought that perhaps, being a good son, Jesus only turned the water into wine in order to make his mother happy—because in my mind it surely didn't make his father—at least the one in heaven—very happy.

Thankfully my understanding of the use and abuse of alcohol has matured over the years and so, for the first time in my career, I feel I am ready to preach on this passage. And, lo and behold, like with so many other Biblical stories—this one really has nothing to do with what it seems to have something to do with. This story isn't about Jesus and wine, this story is about Jesus and us, how Jesus cares for us, empowers us, and makes us—good to the last drop.

In this story, the host of the wedding banquet has run out of wine. Understanding the cultural norms of the day and knowing that this social faux pas would cause the host great humiliation and shame, Mary, not knowing how else to help her friend, the host of this party, calls upon her son Jesus to help. Jesus is reluctant, saying his time had not yet come, but moves ahead with his mother's request.

Now, common wisdom at the time was to serve good wine at the beginning of a party and then, when folks got a little buzzed and couldn't tell the difference, switch out the good stuff for a box *Franzia* to save a few bucks. But Jesus, Jesus changed that water into a very fine wine—I imagine a nice German Riesling or Italian Merlot. And the perceived extravagant generosity of the host of the party, in turn, impressed the guests and caused them to hold the host in very high esteem—indeed in much higher esteem than he would have been held had his own supplies not run out.

And here's the good news that I found in this study of the miracle at the wedding in Cana that I hadn't found before. Yes, it's nice that Jesus could perform a miracle. Yes, it's nice that Jesus obeyed his mother. Yes, it's nice for some, that this miracle at a wedding in Cana is construed as Jesus' affirmation of holy matrimony, though I don't think that's really true of this passage. And yes, it's nice that Jesus saved the party host from embarrassment and shame. But, it doesn't feel like any of those nice things about this story have much of an impact on how I live my life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But what does make an impact and indeed is good news because it brings me great comfort is the knowledge that—when we run out our best stuff, Jesus steps in and makes us even better than we could have ever been on our own. That wedding host—had he not run out of wine, the event that precipitated this miracle—that host would have never been celebrated for his abundant generosity. And it wasn't because of what he did that he was celebrated—it was because of what Christ did through him that he was celebrated. Jesus made that host “good to the last drop” and Jesus does the same for us.

Have you experienced this phenomena—when you feel like you have nothing left to give, that you're at the end of your rope, that you're all tapped out—and suddenly, from nowhere, comes the ability to go on, to persevere, to finish the race? I was having lunch with Alix Jackman this past week and I was remembering a particularly difficult time in my life. I told her

that, in retrospect, I have no idea how I got through it. And I'm quite certain that I didn't get through it, rather, Christ got me through it—because there is no way I could have done what I did on my own.

I was starting my clinical training internship at a trauma hospital in Toledo. It was my first overnight on duty by myself. The staff chaplain left for the day at 6 PM and I was there on my own until 8 AM the next morning. If there were any deaths or traumas in the hospital, I would be called to assist. No sooner had I sat down in the recliner in the chaplain's break room than my pager went off. I called the extension and discovered that I was being paged to the emergency room. When I arrived, I was sent to Trauma Room II. I arrived before the ambulance and found the following written on the dry erase board outside the room . . .

WM-GSW-Head-SI

I got the first part—white male. I understood that the injury had something to do with his head. But other than that, I didn't understand the cryptic notations. But, after the ambulance arrived, it didn't take me long to crack the code—white male, gun shot wound, to the head, self-inflicted. Now mind you, I don't watch ER because it's too bloody. If I get more than a paper cut, I nearly gag at the site of my own blood. On a third grade field trip to a meat processing plant, I had to leave the room when they began skinning the hog. (It was a poorer rural school district; the field trip pickings were slim.) And yet, there I was, at this young man's bedside, a very bloody place indeed. It was my job to pick through his bloody clothes, searching for a wallet that would offer us information about his identity. It was my job to talk to him while the doctors and technicians worked on him. It was my job to meet the family when they arrived at the hospital in a state of panic. And yet, when I think back on that traumatic night, I know it wasn't me doing those things. There's no way that Robin Long, second year seminarian, could have done what I was called on to do that night. That night I was a vessel, that's the only way to explain it. I was tired, hungry, stressed out, confused, and scared—and that was all before I received the summons to the ER. And yet, in the midst of my weakness and medical hang-ups, Jesus made me good to the last drop, not for my own good, but for the good of that young man and his family who desperately needed a glimpse of God's love that night.

I trust you have similar stories, stories of times when you thought you were too tired, too sick, too sad, too poor, too uneducated, too unworthy, too unqualified, and yet, somehow you pulled through, you made it and lived to tell about it and you know, you know that there was a Higher Power at work in that situation—there was something else that helped you to persevere, something else that kept you good to the last drop.

And that my friends, is the good news about the miracle of the wedding at Cana. This story is not, at its core, a celebration of marriage, good wine, or Jesus' first public miracle. This story is about the miracle that began on that day and continues to this day—the miracle of the way Jesus empowers us and sustains us, the way Jesus makes us on this day and everyday, good to the last drop. Thanks be to God.