

**Grace Episcopal Church**  
**January 20, 2013**  
**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**Text: John 2: 1-11**

It wasn't the wedding itself that I remember. It must have been the rehearsal dinner that sticks in my mind. My good musician friend and I had been invited to do the wedding for the son of his former parishioners in a Methodist Church in Crystal Lake. We went to his favorite restaurant after the rehearsal. And, after some conversation and time, a few drinks, some marvelous food, out came some more wine. It was a bottle of Opus One, a California blend that is easily 20 X what I normally pay. It had been allowed to breathe a while before it was decanted and poured into our Riedl glasses. We dutifully swirled it, sniffed it, and then sipped letting the wine linger in our mouths before swallowing. Wow! Now my palate is not sophisticated enough to describe the notes of plum or cherry, tobacco or oak. But the aroma was heavenly, the finish long. Aah.

Alas, it was just one bottle. And there were quite a few of us at the table. One small taste showed me what was possible at the same time that I knew this would not become a regular part of my life.

The wedding at Cana was different. Once Jesus was persuaded to solve the wine shortage problem, there was not just a taste of that excellent wine. Those of you who are good with numbers have probably done the math. Six stone jars that each held 20-30 gallons would mean, say, 150 gallons or more than 19,000 ounces. So, a nice 4 oz. pour would fill 4,800 glasses. Abundance. I don't know how many people would live in a small Galilean village, but probably not nearly 5,000. Abundance. More than "just enough" to fix the problem.

Turning water into wine seems like a rather odd miracle to signal the beginning of Jesus' ministry. At least, compared to miracles of healing, exorcising demons, or bringing people back to life. Even knowing that weddings in that time went on for nearly a week and understanding the shame that would accrue to a family that did not provide enough food and drink to its wedding guests doesn't fully explain it. Why did John choose this as the first miracle?

Some of you may recall a sermon I gave last summer where I talked about a former parishioner, Jack, who just had no use for the miracle stories in the Gospels. He was a man of deep faith who attended the weekly Bible study without fail. But miracles were just extraneous for him, and this story of the wedding in Cana was a particular problem.

I confess that I was not much help to him. That was my first ministry placement, right out of seminary. And I was just as caught up in Enlightenment thinking as he was. Having to explain away the miracles or treating them with cynicism. I am still on that journey, but I've come to appreciate layers of meaning and have learned that when we are hearing the Gospel according to John, it is especially necessary to look beyond the surface. John was not so interested in historicity or chronology of events as he was in deeper meanings that reveal Jesus' person and purpose.

In this particular story, there are many hints of John's focus. First, he calls these acts of Jesus "signs" rather than "miracles." Signs point to something beyond themselves. They carry more

meaning than what might be immediately evident. Meaning that is not easily grasped but full enough to unfold over time. There are seven signs in John's Gospel. Each one is a manifestation of Jesus. And the first is the changing of water into wine.

Here are some of those hints. The story begins with the words, "on the third day." Where else do we hear about a third day? The Resurrection. Is there a link?

Jesus seems a bit curt when he calls his mother "Woman." In John's Gospel, Mary appears only twice and is not named either time. Here, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, he calls her "Woman." From the cross, at the end of his life, he leaves her in the care of the beloved disciple: "Woman, behold your son." Her two appearances bookend his public life.

When his mother tells him that the wine has run out, he chides her and says that his hour has not come. Throughout this Gospel, Jesus talks about "his hour." At the end, he says, "my hour is at hand.

We see that only the servants are aware of what has happened. They, after all, were the ones who had to haul the water to fill those huge jugs. The disciples knew, too, since it is said that after the sign, they believed. But the steward, the wedding guests, the wedding family did not know.

Maybe the most important of all is the meaning arising from the context of the wedding feast itself. We find the feast throughout the Bible. It is in Isaiah: on the mountain, a lavish feast of rich food and well-aged wines. It is in several of Jesus' parables in the Gospels. And it is in the Book of Revelation where that holy city is described. The wedding feast or banquet is the foretaste of the realm of God. The place of abundance where all are welcome. The feast that signifies that the realm is among us, initiated through Jesus' ministry in the world, but not yet fulfilled.

The fulfillment of that realm seems to be a long time in coming. In just a few minutes, Barack Obama will take the oath of office for his second term as President of the United States. He will lay his hand on a Bible from Michelle's family. Tomorrow, for the ceremonial swearing in, he will use two Bibles--those of Abraham Lincoln and of Martin Luther King, Jr. For only the second time ever, the inauguration has fallen on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Our president will swear upon the Bibles of two men who changed the course of history in the direction of God's realm. Lincoln emancipated the slaves, and in his Gettysburg address called for a "new birth of freedom."

And yet, one hundred years--a century later, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, because the descendants of those freed slaves still had not received the right to vote, attend schools of their choice, sit in restaurants or in buses or use restrooms with whites. Martin Luther King, Jr. brought his vision and dream, and gave his own life for it. On several occasions, including his very last sermon at National Cathedral before his assassination, he borrowed words from a 19<sup>th</sup> century, pre-Civil War Unitarian pastor. King said, "Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Another forty years passed, and we had the first man of color in the White House. Hopes were high for a vision of new unity, of hands across the aisle of difference in Congress, of partnership and cooperation. In April, 2008, at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary observance of King's assassination, newly inaugurated President Obama said, "the arc does not bend on its own, but because each of us puts our hands on it and bend it in the direction of justice." And that arc remains long. Racism is still

alive and well. It is not the only reason for resistance or opposition to the current administration, of course, but it is far too present. What a tragic fact of life it is that our seminarians and candidates for ordination are still required to take anti-racism training!

Indeed, the arc is long, the realm of God is long in being fulfilled. We get but glimpses, small tastes of the joy that God desires for us. Each week, we gather at the table and receive the bread and the wine. It is a celebration, an act of very personal unity with Christ, but also an act of community. It is but a sip of wine and a bit of bread that whets our appetite for that lavish wedding banquet that is yet to come. But in the meantime it strengthens and sustains us so that we can place our hands on the arc and bend it toward that day when all will be fed, when the varied gifts of all people will not only be accepted but desired--for the common good.

Opus One or Rex Goliath? Whichever it is, savor it. And come to the feast!

Amen.