

“Water and Wine”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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John 2: 1-11

Whenever I read this story from the Gospel of John, and I read about Jesus turning water into wine, my mind goes straight to communion. I know that’s probably not theologically correct, but my mind has never worked “correctly” theologically. No, when I hear about the water miraculously turning into wine, I think about a couple of occasions that God provided just what was necessary when the Lord’s Supper was being celebrated.

The first occasion was when I candidated to be the pastor of this congregation nearly thirteen years ago. We celebrated communion as part of the combined worship service that day. And there was a larger crowd than usual that Sunday. So, I sent out the elders and deacons to distribute the bread and the juice, and when they came back to the communion table, they kept handing me empty juice trays. Finally, between the two last trays, there were just enough cups to serve the elders and deacons who were around the table. God provided just what we needed!

The second occasion was for a service that Debbie recalls from her childhood in Martinsville. It was Christmas Eve, and those who were tasked with preparing communion that evening realized that they did not have enough grape juice to complete the necessary number of trays. It was late and all the grocery stores had closed. So someone ran out to a gas station and picked up whatever they could find. I’m sure that Chancel Guild wishes Jesus has been around to turn water into wine that Christmas Eve. But instead, the last couple of pews at First Presbyterian Church in Martinsville had to make do with Dr. Pepper in their communion cups!

The other thing that comes to mind when I read this story about Jesus, his mother, and the wedding at Cana is how telling it is that a “miracle” takes place at a wedding. For any of us who have attended weddings, or been a part of weddings, “miracle” would likely be the word we would use to describe that event. It’s a miracle that people get to where they need to be, or that the ceremony starts on time, or that no one has too bad of a meltdown at some point during the weekend. Weddings are joyous occasions for family and friends, to be sure. But it can also be a miracle when they are pulled off without anyone getting too emotionally distraught in the process!

What does a miracle look like to you? It might be someone being cured of what was thought to be an incurable disease. It might be an

airplane landing in the Hudson River without anyone being injured or killed. It might be someone being rescued from an earthquake after there seemed to be no hope of survivors.

What does a miracle from Jesus' life look like to you? The story of the wedding at Cana is intriguing in many different ways. There is the interaction between Jesus and his mother, a give-and-take that sounds more like a teenager talking back to his parent. There is the mysterious changing of water into wine, which takes place "in transport" from the servants to the chief steward. And there is the declaration that this was "the first of his signs," signs which steer his followers closer to believing in him as God's own Son.

But overarching all of these characteristics is the theme of miracle: the breaking in by God into the human order to accomplish something that previously had appeared impossible. Every time I read a miracle story of Jesus, I seem to ask myself the same series of questions. Do I believe miracles still occur today? Does it take a miracle to cause me to believe? Or do I have to believe in God first in order to experience a miracle? Whenever we read the miracle stories of Jesus, I think we all can relate to these questions because it can be very difficult for us to comprehend what the miracles mean. They are more than a magic trick, more than an answered prayer - they are moments which remind us that God has been, is, and always will be in control, and God invites us to share in that grace through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Indeed, today's story is but one example of the opening theme in the Gospel of John of Jesus promising "greater things" which are going to come (1:50). As Gail O'Day writes, The events of [the first five chapters] - the two "signs", the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the renewed witness of John, the healing of the man beside the pool - all demonstrate the authority of Jesus' words and works. Jews and non-Jews, men and women all see and hear the "greater things" Jesus says and does . . . These chapters establish the central themes and tensions of the entire Gospel: the possibilities of new life and faith made available through the words and works of Jesus, and the decisions individuals are called to in the face of those possibilities (Gail R. O'Day, New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995: 535).

And in this story from John, we witness the decisions different individuals made in the face of God's grace. When the chief steward tastes the wine that the servants have brought to him, he did not know where it could have come from. So he calls the bridegroom over to try and rationalize why this has happened: "Everyone serves the good wine first . . . But you have kept the good wine until now" (2:10). On the surface, the steward could not believe that such wine was still available, and showers praise on the bridegroom for saving the best wine until later.

Of course, we know this is not the case through Jesus' actions. There is no way to explain it. All you are left to do is to believe it or not. To believe that God could be that gracious; to believe that God could be that unbelievable.

Brian Stoffregen makes an interesting comparison between the stone jars and our human selves: Something I hadn't noticed before is that these jars were empty. The servants have to fill them with water before the miracle occurs. Jesus is not transforming the purification water that was in the jars into the wine; but he is transforming new water that has been placed in the old containers . . . In contrast to Mark 2:21-22 - new wine needs new wineskins - here the image seems to be that the new wine can be held by the old containers . . . I might suggest that the "old container" could be our bodies, and that Jesus can transform what is inside the "container" - the sinner becomes a saint, the pagan becomes a child of God, the polluted becomes pure (Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes*, www.crossmarks.com/brian/john2x1.htm).

Do we believe that God can transform our old bodies into something new? When we have lived in the shadow of sin for so long, that can be something liberating and, at the same time, painful to hear. It's liberating to believe that our old, stale, polluted water can be poured out of these old containers, and new, purified water can fill our every crevice. It's painful to consider letting go of what we have grown accustomed to, and how something new will sit inside the limits of our old selves. Do we believe that God can transform our old bodies into something new?

Do we believe that God can transform the old skins of the church with new water that fills its walls? I have heard it said that it is easier to start a new congregation than to try and change an established one. If that is the case, does that mean we don't believe our own water can be transformed into something new? Do we believe that God still performs miracles in the old, established church we all are a part of?

I have never been one to discount miracles, but I also have never been one to always be on the lookout for them. I know that many people have experienced something transforming in their lives which they thought before was impossible. But I also know that we can sometimes put too much weight in the idea of a miracle, so much so that we lose perspective on what is real and what is "unreal."

But in this event in Jesus' life, we see the way the Spirit works to create faith in those who before did not believe. And if we view a miracle through those eyes - as the Spirit's movement to create faith - then we can begin to see what we do as the church and as individual Christians in a new light. We don't know how a class we teach, or a worship service we lead, or a visit we make, or a meal we prepare, or the time we give may impact another person at that time. But if we have faith to believe that our works are filled with the Holy Spirit, then

we begin to understand what discipleship is all about. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee . . . and his disciples believed in him” (2:11).

This week, our community experienced more sadness and grief with the news that Andrew Smith died on Tuesday. Andrew was on the Butler basketball teams that appeared in back-to-back national championship games in 2010 and 2011. He attended Covenant Christian High School, where Ben McKinnon-Duggins, Saralyn and Jocelyn McKinnon-Crowley attended. Dawnie Barnhouse taught Andrew as an elementary school student in Zionsville. Andrew died of lymphoma and leukemia, and was only 25 years old.

On the surface, it would appear that there were no miracles that occurred to save Andrew from a much-too premature death. A young man that exhibited such vigor and vitality on a national stage only five years earlier, is now gone after being diagnosed only two years ago with cancer. Where is the miracle? Where was God in the midst of this tragedy?

While heart-breaking and tragic, I would argue that a miracle did occur this week through Andrew Smith. It occurred in the incredibly beautiful, transparent, and honest thoughts his wife, Samantha, shared throughout Andrew’s illness and final days. It occurred in the way Andrew sought with every ounce of his being to encourage people to sign-up for the bone marrow registry, so that others battling lymphoma and leukemia might have the chance to live longer lives and overcome cancer. It occurred in the actions, words, and remembrances of teammates, coaches, community leaders, strangers, and friends, who gave thanks to God for Andrew’s life of service and faith.

The miracle occurred in the midst of a tragic situation, where God’s abiding Spirit brought forth comfort and strength in the face of fear and doubt.

Whether it is a tragic situation like Andrew Smith’s death, or an unbelievable event that takes place, or an everyday, seemingly mundane interaction with someone else – miracles do take place all the time, so that others might come to believe in God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs . . . and his disciples believed in him” (2:11).

Thanks be to God. Amen.