

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 17, 2016)

Texts:

John 2:1-11 (*The Message*)

Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also. When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, "They're just about out of wine."

Jesus said, "Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine? This isn't my time. Don't push me."

She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, "Whatever he tells you, do it."

Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus ordered the servants, "Fill the pots with water." And they filled them to the brim.

"Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host," Jesus said, and they did.

When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn't know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew), he called out to the bridegroom, "Everybody I know begins with their finest wines and after the guests have had their fill brings in the cheap stuff. But you've saved the best till now!"

This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Too Holy to be Happy?"**
(Incorporating Psalm 36:5-10)

"Your steadfast love, O God,
extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds."

Have you ever thought about how much so many Christians celebrate the suffering and misery of Jesus? It's understandable, I guess. We who are suffering and miserable love the idea of knowing that God understands what we're going through and, indeed, experienced the way pain and challenge beset us and weigh us down in this particular incarnation.

However, as I peered deeply into this story of Jesus in John's gospel today, I had to wonder why we seem to so often revel in the dark, painful, miserable aspects of Christ's human life and often forget about how much joy and celebration was involved in his ministry and his life here on earth.

"Your righteousness is like
the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O God."

As I looked through dozens of images on line searching for at least one of a JOYFUL Jesus, I was impressed with how few representations there are of the Christ with a smile on his face or even a simple expression of contentment. I found this one (on the screen in front of you) by searching for "Happy Jesus" and found it buried deep inside a plethora of pictures depicting either a quite frankly sacrilegious array of what looked like hood-ornament-Jesus flashing a kind of Fonzie thumbs-up sign (ayyyyy) or quite ridiculous and even grotesque pictures that really shouldn't be allowed to have any association with any of God's children!

IN the story before us today, the one that John decides to tell as the first miracle of Jesus after he has been baptized by another John (although, as the People's Bible tells us, due to the lack of evidence of exactly who the writer of this gospel is it would be better to attribute it to "an anonymous author from an undisclosed location and at an unknown time") we see Jesus fresh from the river and the calling of his disciples attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee where his mother just happens to be as well.

Isn't it fascinating to get these glimpses of the Christ in his truly human form, interacting with his mother and the people at the wedding and, like most sons I know, wondering why his mother is making it her business and now his to do something about the wine when it runs out? I can actually picture Jesus there, laughing it up with his new friends and enjoying the celebration and then most likely cringing in embarrassment in front of them as his mom prods him to do something he either doesn't want to or feels ready to do.

But isn't that what a mom is supposed to do? Prod us into stepping into our call and urging us to help others with the gifts we've been given? Here is one instance where Jesus may not have felt his time had come, but his mother surely did. Perhaps it's another way the gospels show us how all of us are partners with God and sent here to call out each other's gifts and help pave the way for the miracles to unfold.

Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus to receive His beloved blessing from above, helping to put him on the path to calling his disciples, so Mary his mother prepares the way for Jesus to perform his first miracle, bringing joy and happiness to those gathered and revealing his glory that his perhaps still deciding disciples skipped the caucus and believed in him in that very moment.

And what a way for his glory to first be revealed to them! This first miracle isn't in the midst of sorrow as a loved one has died or in the midst of pain as a woman hemorrhages or one with leprosy wastes away as we will see in subsequent stories, but rather it is another way to fulfill need by bringing joy and abundance to those in the midst of celebration - reminding us of another greatly joyful miracle concerning a little boy's basket of loaves and fishes and the multitudes fed and satisfied.

"This overflowing gift - six stone jars of wine when just one might have been enough, is a sign..." our UCC theologian Kate Huey comments, citing Ann Svennungsen's writings. "First, the jars are "special," because they hold the water used in the religious purification rituals. They are large, too, each one holding 15-25 gallons, and they're filled to the brim..."

"And from these big and special and brim-filled jars came the best-tasting wine served at the wedding. This wine, like overflowing grain and oil, are "signs of a golden age... The guests...know something important is happening when such wonderful wine flows at the end, not the beginning, of the celebration...real human thirst, like our deepest hunger, is for the life God offers us, the close, living relationship with the One who loves us."

"How precious is your steadfast love,

O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings."

Do you see how Jesus offers not only the quenching of thirst both physically and spiritually through this miracle, but an affirmation that life is also to be enjoyed? From this sign, we see that God's bounty is overflowing and it is only our limited beliefs that keep us from experiencing the abundance that God has in store for us. Why settle for water when you can have wine?!

I can't tell you how many times, even this week, I put limitations on God's abundance and God's desire for me to live life to its fullest, knowing that within God's care I am, as are you, filled to the brim with every good thing God wants for us.

"They feast on the abundance
of your house,
and you give them drink
from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light."

In the fantastic commentary collection called "Feasting on the Word," Robert Brearly points out that we need to keep this first sign of Jesus when he turns water into wine in mind when thinking about how we worship and practice our faith, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in," he writes.

Kate Huey picks up on this idea and wonders if, "we in the church may need to examine our role in suppressing the joy of a life lived in and by grace, a life lived fully, abundantly, vibrantly."

"It occurs to me" she writes, "that a dour attitude in the church might shed light on why so many people look elsewhere for sources and stories of joy in their lives, some of those sources better than others, of course, but many of them able to connect people with God's own joy and goodness in ways that are meaningful and even transformative in people's lives."

I know that I have witnessed this phenomenon in many ways not only in my life as a minister but in my life "out in the world," as it were. The guilt and self loathing that are so evident is so many people raised in Christianity can be a true hindrance to their own healing and well being and can keep so many of us from experiencing the true freedom Christ embodied for us.

Where in your life do you suppress the natural joy that God wants to bubble forth? Are there times when you become so overwhelmed with the work and the worry and the frustration over the foibles of others that you forget the sun is shining on despite the dark clouds that have come between you and it?

"What is life abundant without joy?" Kate asks. "No doubt God is at work in unexpected places and in surprising ways, but shouldn't we lament when the church lacks a vital and deep sense of joy in the gospel?" How's that for a paradox?

She also notes commentator Richard Bauckham who, "reminds us that Jesus was about bringing life abundant, 'life invigorated and intensified.' Jesus does this 'by connecting people with the divine springs of life from which the vitality of life is constantly sustained and replenished.'"

I'm fascinated by the symbolism of the vessels Jesus chooses at the wedding to bring about the transformation. "They were containers," the Rev. Bob Elder points out, that were "set aside for the rites of Jewish purification." It would seem to me that Jesus is picking these out specifically to demonstrate the change that can occur in each of us as he himself becomes the living water,

purifying the vessel that is each one of us through the transformation of our very souls. And, really, what better reason do we need to rejoice than that?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20th century once wrote that "People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration [however] is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state--it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or a spectacle....Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions."

Jesus confronts us with the true meaning of celebration. Will we be co-creators with God in turning our mourning into dancing? Are we willing to wake from our suffering and allow God to take off our sackcloth and clothe us with joy?

Come, let us be transformed in our thinking and our acting, affirming once again that weeping may linger for the night but joy comes with the morning.

"O continue your steadfast love
to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!"

Blessing the Water, the Wine

by Jan Richardson

You thought
you had learned
to live with the empty,
the hollow.
You could place your ear
against the rim
of the vessel
of your life
and hear its ringing echo
with equanimity,
not expecting
any more
not even bothered
(almost)
to be a bystander
at the feast—
if not delighting
in the celebration
at least not
despairing in it.
When the water
rushed into the emptiness
you were surprised
that you were surprised,
that you could even feel
the sudden wellspring

when you thought
all had been poured out.
And then suddenly
the sweetness
that stuns you
that tells you
this was not all,
this was not the end
that this blessing
was saving the best
for last.
Amen.