

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

John 2:1-11

16 January 2022

Water and Wine

Opening Greeting & Prayer: Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to all who join our service with me online. Welcome to any and all guests this morning. We are so glad to have you here with us. Let us pray: God of living water and new wine, we long for the transformation that you inspire in us through the way and will of Jesus. May our lives be as refreshing as a drink of cool water and as exuberant and celebratory as a glass of aged wine to all of our neighbors. May your love pour forth from our words and actions as we seek to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Amen.

Message: Several years ago, Morgan and I took a trip to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. West of Denver, we came to the Eisenhower Tunnel, which cuts through the mountains of the continental divide. When we came out of the tunnel still heading west, we noticed a sign sitting to the right of the road, warning all drivers of the long, steep grade ahead as the interstate winds back down the mountain. We started the downhill descent and soon began passing most of the traffic around us. Morgan looked at me and asked if we might need to slow down. I said that we were fine and that I felt comfortable with our speed. 15 minutes later when the road leveled out, I could feel the adrenaline of the descent, while I think Morgan was still braced in her seat, white-knuckled and wondering if she might be sick. Little did we realize how differently that we would experience the reality that the sign had been pointing out to us when we first noticed it.

In the book of John, the evangelist or author calls the miracles of Jesus, *signs*, meaning that they point us to a much bigger, stranger, more complex reality than we might realize when we read the stories initially. Our passage this morning in John 2 is the first sign or miracle of Jesus' ministry in a small village about 4 miles from Nazareth called Cana. Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a wedding celebration there. Mary, Jesus's mother, was also present at the wedding, though we are not told why. Maybe a family member is getting married. Maybe she has joined some of the women in Cana in getting the food prepared for the special event. Most likely, this celebration was several days of preparation and celebrating, meaning that in a place with no refrigeration, everything had to be prepared fresh and not long before the guests would enjoy it, which means there were unending amounts of work to be done.

In rural Lesotho, where I worked and learned 10 years ago with MCC, these special events happened on Saturdays only. The women of the local village or family would spend night and day of the week prior, butchering a cow, preparing vegetables and fruits, cooking meat, mixing stews, boiling cornmeal, and making sure everything was just right. I wonder if Mary had been working hours and hours, only to hear that the central drink of the celebration had run out. I can hear the exhaustion, exasperation, anxiety, and frustration in her voice as she tells Jesus, her oldest son, "They have no wine."

They may not have seen each other in a while; Jesus had quit showing up with the other laborers each morning in Nazareth and instead, had been wandering around Galilee, calling younger men to join his posse. Mary had even heard that he had been baptized by John, their relative, in the Jordan River in Judea. She was happy and relieved when she heard that he had come back to Galilee, especially after John had been thrown in prison. Maybe this is the first time that she's seen him since he left Nazareth for Judea. I wonder if Jesus, after hearing about

the wine, gives her an incredulous look as he says, “what is that to you or me?” I can see Mary walking away, pulling a servant to the side and telling him to wait on Jesus’s instructions. What about this moment, about this need, about this event led Mary to think that Jesus could or would make a difference? Maybe all of the memories of Jesus’s unique past made her anxious to see when he would finally begin living into the calling that God had spoken to her in Bethlehem.

Why Jesus notices the jars for ceremonial washing, I’m not sure, but he tells the servants to fill all six of them with water, a lofty task for any number of servants at 20-30 gallons a piece. Wouldn’t all of the guests have already done their ceremonial washing upon arrival to the event? Or have guests been turned away because there is no water to wash, meaning that some are not welcomed to the celebration? Interesting to note also that there are 6 jars, a number that symbolizes deficiency or lacking or less than within the Hebrew scriptures. The servants listen and follow Jesus’s instruction; they begin collecting the water. What is Jesus going to do with all of this water? Water might be good for washing, but in the first-century, it was not always good for much else. Any number of waterborne bacteria could make someone very sick, which is why wine was the standard drink. Fermentation was a simple process that cleansed the water of the impurities that were dangerous to people and offered the mirth and revelry of alcohol. Suddenly what was life-limiting or even death-inducing has been transformed into something life-giving, even life-sustaining. Up to this point in the story though, the servants are fully aware that all Jesus has are 6 jars filled with 150 or so gallons of water.

When Jesus asks one of the servants to take a cup of the water to the chief steward, the servant has got to think that Jesus is crazy. What is the steward going to do to the servant when he takes a big gulp of water? Would the steward spit it in the servant’s face? Would he tell the servant to leave and never let her work for the family again? The steward smiles when he takes a

drink; then he tells the servant to go find the groom. Uh oh! Did he know where the water had come from? What would the servant do now? The servant found the groom and led him back to the steward, waiting for the embarrassment or the retribution for giving the steward water.

Instead, the steward complimented the groom on the wine that he had drank, and the servant did a double-take. Wine? What wine? When had the steward gotten wine? Even better than the first wine? but the wine first served was the family's best wine? Where did this wine come from? How did it... and the servant realized. She walked back to the jars of water and filled another cup. She slipped a taste, and the warmth of the sweet liquid flowed across her tongue and tickled her throat. The water had become wine. Jesus had done it! Mary was right, but how would the servants explain it to the steward or the groom? All of the servants quickly began serving the guests from this new wine, and the atmosphere of the party changed immediately. The disgrace had been transformed into celebration, all because of Jesus.

This miracle, this sign though pointed to a much bigger reality that Jesus was revealing. Yes, the party kept on late into the evening as the bride and groom cherished these early moments of marriage and community support. The guests who had arrived late because of travelling got a taste of this new wine. Those who would have been served last were given some of the first tastes of this superior vintage. This new wine is not only for the arrival of a new marriage, but for the arrival of Messiah, the long-awaited king and bridegroom, promised by God. In this new kingdom, wine, the symbol of life and blessing, does not run out. There is enough for all of the guests, no matter their status, race, class, gender, or background.

Interestingly, those with no voice in the story, the ones who literally do not speak once, the servants, are the ones who know the truth about the whole thing. The great reversal, the marvelous unexpected happens from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. The first ones to

spread the word of Jesus's signs or miracles are the very ones whom no one would believe.

Similarly, those with the most power, control, and influence are helpless to make more wine and ignorant of the truly miraculous. They have missed the presence of the word made flesh.

Even more interesting, then, is that all of the guests get to share in the blessing and new life of Jesus's kingdom, even those least deserving like the steward or the groom. That's when we realize that new life in Jesus is a gracious gift, completely unearned and freely received, as close as the air we breathe and as hope-filled as the sunshine that warms our skin. What had been used previously, the stone water jars holding the water for purification have suddenly become vessels of new life, not limiting with labels of clean or unclean, sinful or holy, bad or good, Jew or gentile, black or white, disabled or able, put together or falling apart. Jesus offers each of us the grace of new life and hope in a family unlike any other, where all are welcome. In Jesus's love and acceptance comes the transformation of the polluted water of our lives into the sweet wine of new creation as one of God's children. Will you follow the sign of water and wine, continuing down the road ahead into transformation, new life, and gracious welcome?

Closing Prayer: Let us pray: awesome and powerful God, we look to you when the wine of our lives has run out, when we realize that we cannot do this on our own, when our hope no longer lies in our merits, abilities, prowess, power, or achievement. Give us a taste of the new wine of your kingdom and empower us to share this new life in your family, your kingdom with our neighbors and enemies. In Jesus' name. Amen.