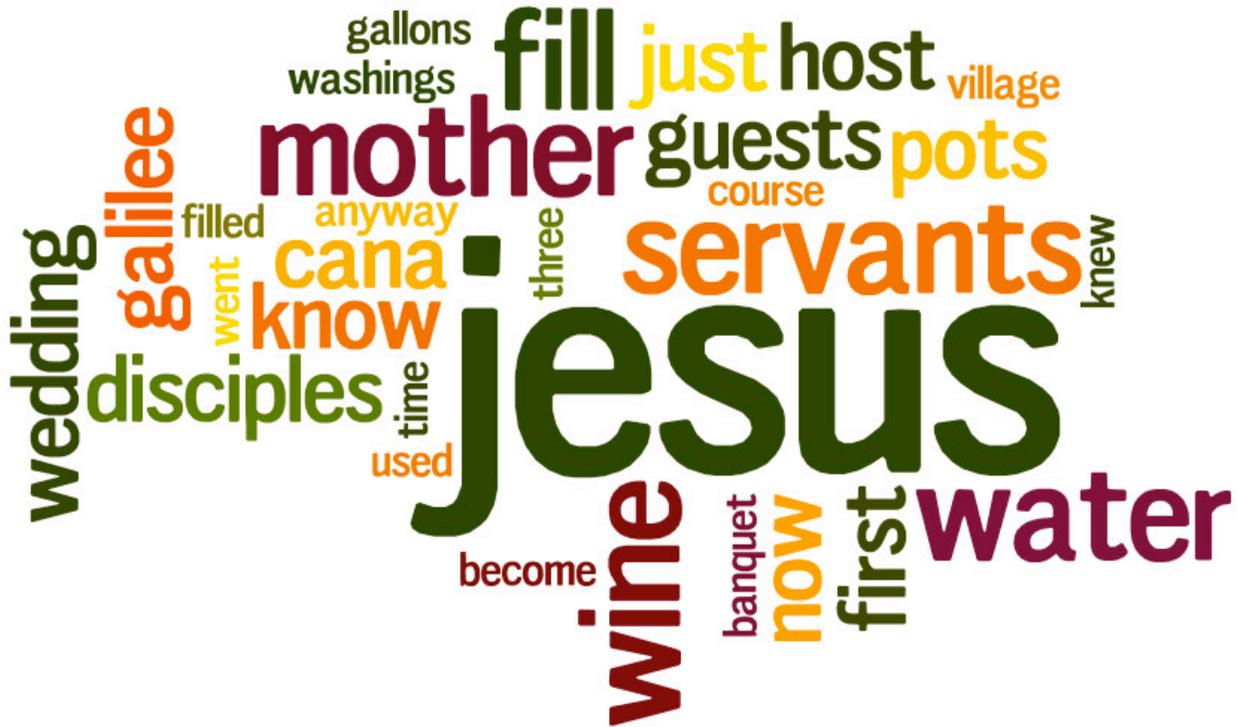


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Alter Call  
Wesley Mimco United Church  
January 20, 2013  
by Paul Shepherd

Based on John 2:1-11



Today is the third week of epiphany, and our gospel reading was about the third revelation of Jesus. That revelation came through the sign of Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana - that occasion when Jesus found himself completely surrounded by no wine. It was a sign. At least, John calls it "a sign". Many people who talk about this story refer to it as a miracle, not a sign. Whatever we want to call it – it was at least a surprise.

But in any case, I somewhat tempted to just forget the whole thing. Or at the very least, I'm tempted to keep the conversation about this story at a highly abstract, theological, theoretical level. Because I'm not sure I want to engage with a story where Jesus talks back to his mother and encourages the over-consumption of alcohol. John may have had some lofty theological

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objectives in writing the text, but in the end, we are left with the story – as one Emmanuel College professor calls it – of Jesus, the party animal.

And yet, I can't leave the story at an abstract level. It's just not possible for me. For one thing, the historicity of this story is far from clear. That is, of course, the politically correct way of saying that many scholars do not believe that the story happened at all. And the fact that the story only appears on the gospel of John and in none of the synoptic gospels should at least give us pause for thought. What was John trying to accomplish with this story, that the other gospel writers did not care about?

But beyond that - the story is - to say the least - not very united churchy. Here in the United Church we don't even use wine for communion, and here is Jesus giving out free wine by the gallon. Since the host ran out of wine we have to imagine that everyone at the party was already soused. Why give them even more wine? The story actually seems to encourage irresponsible drinking. Moreover, the guests were likely quite drunk already and dehydrated from all the alcohol that the host had originally provided. The guests probably needed water to combat dehydration more than they needed more wine at that moment. If Jesus was more united-churchy, we would expect him to encourage the guests to drink the water in its original form and to take it easy on the booze.

A literal reading of the story suggests that Jesus did not share our modern day concerns about alcohol abuse. But perhaps there are other ways to read the story. Perhaps the story is not about alcohol at all, but has a deeper meaning. Perhaps the story is really about something else entirely. Perhaps the wine is simply a vehicle to deeper meaning – or as the Romans would have said – *in vino veritas*. What does this story mean to you?

*[discussion from floor – include wordle (figure on first page)]*

One interesting feature of this story is that Jesus didn't just turn water into wine, he created wine from water and the jars that were intended for use in the ritual of hand-washing. Jesus didn't create wine out of thin air. In the story Jesus creates wine out of water that was intended to service a long-standing traditional ritual. In Jesus's day, of course, hand washing was not done for medical reasons, it was done simply as one of many cultural traditions that tradition dictated must be followed. I'm not saying that hand-washing was not important to the people of the day, just that the importance was ritualistic, not medical.

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In other words, providing more wine and allowing the party to continue was more important than following the long-standing cultural tradition of hand-washing. Or perhaps it was simply a clash between two traditions - the tradition of having lots of wine at a party that went on for days and the tradition of ritual hand-washing.

Jesus didn't just create wine – he did it – on that one occasion at least, by eliminating a symbolic ritual. Jesus didn't just create wine. He transformed a symbolic object from one use to another use.

But in any case, the tradition that was there just for the sake of tradition was less important. The party was important. Fellowship was important. Relationship was important. And being a good host was important.

It's not that the traditions were unimportant, it's just that engaging in the present was more important than holding a tradition from the past.

Can we imagine that sort of party here – in this congregation? Can we imagine having to choose, and giving more value to building relationships and building community than holding onto some of the traditions of our past? What traditions are we willing to look beyond – right here? And what vision of new relationships can we imagine – right here? What are we willing to give up, and what might we expect to gain in exchange?

Particularly as we are now beginning to discuss concrete plans for the renewal of this church building – what do we think about our traditions? Are we committed to holding onto all of them? Are there some traditions we want to keep? Are there others that we are willing to let go? And are there some traditions that can be transformed to provide new life?

And what do we think about potential new relationships that we might develop? Are there new relationships with the community that we look forward to? Are there some that we fear? Are there some that need transformation to bring new life?

And what do we think of the word “change” anyway? When we hear the word “change” in church – what do you think of? Do you think that Paul's new here and he'll get over it? Is change what you will be putting in the collection this morning? When you hear “change”, do you think “again” ... or do you think “about time”?

If anyone here hates change, I would ask them if they have ever been in their car at a red light. Besides, sometimes we have to change just to stay as we are.

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I recently read a story that struck me. The story was about 2 men who had hunkered down to watch the Grey Cup. They had arranged themselves in a small den and had the TV, their snacks and their drinks all set. They were - as we say - “in for the duration”. If you want a mental picture of what their situation looked like, imagine the forts that children build out of tables, chairs, and blankets and you are probably on the right track. They had barricaded themselves in to the den.

It was a good game. The men were enjoying themselves.

Then, at half-time, the men's wives unexpectedly showed up, along with their children - some teenagers, some younger, but all keen to share in the excitement of the big game. The den was way too small to accommodate any extra bodies.

So, they quickly moved the TV to the living room, did massive furniture rearrangement and major reorganization and finished just in time for the second half. The rest of the game was enjoyed by the larger, lively, crowd.

No big deal, right? That's exactly what you think should have happened, right?

But think about what actually happened. They men had to change nearly everything to keep on doing what they had already been doing and wanted to continue doing. Massive change just to stay the same? Not exactly, because the changes allowed other people to participate in the game too. Without a willingness to change, the group could not have expanded. Practically everything changed, but the “point” of the whole exercise - which was watching the football game - remained the same. The “essential ingredient” of the event was preserved.

For me, there are strong parallels between that story and today's church. The key is for us to figure out what the “essential ingredients” are so that they can be preserved while other elements - the details - are allowed to change.

And so I invite each of us to consider what the “essential ingredients” of this community of faith are. What traditions and relationships do we need to preserve in order to keep being who we are. What traditions and relationships are we willing to let go of? What traditions and relationships are we willing to transform in order to bring new life to them?

What is it that makes us Wesley Mimico United Church?

*Amen.*