
Alter Call
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 16, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 2:1-11

[image: water into wine]

This is the Sunday that we always get wrong in the church. I'm serious. I mean, think of all the celebrations we have during the church year. Last week we celebrated the baptism of Jesus. We regularly celebrate healing stories, and we try to locate ourselves within those stories. We celebrate the birth of Jesus. We like to celebrate and sometimes even re-enact some biblical narratives. This week, we have the story of Jesus turning water into wine. Why don't we ever celebrate that? Imagine if we had told people that this was "Turning Water into Wine" Sunday. How packed would these pews be? You know. Everyone who comes brings a litre of water and they leave with 1 litre of wine? Even with covid that would be a popular event.

But I will follow church tradition and confess that today we have a gospel reading I'd really rather just ignore. But I suppose some of you here had to fight your way through the weather to get here. So I should at least pretend to put some effort into this. And besides, this is a very famous story from the gospel of John. The story where Jesus finds himself at a wedding. And he finds himself completely surrounded by no wine. So he just makes some. It's a great story. In the story, this is referred to as a sign, a sign that Jesus was the son of God. We ourselves might think of it more as a miracle. But whatever we call it, it was a memorable story.

[image: bread sticks]

Even so, I am 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 objectives in writing the text. But in the end, we are left with the story - as one of my seminary professors called it - the story of "Jesus, the party animal".

[image: Jesus the party animal]

And yet, I can not leave the story at an abstract level. For one thing, the historicity of this story is unclear. That is, of course, the politically correct way of saying that many scholars do not believe that the story happened at all. The fact that the story only appears in the gospel of John and in none of the other gospels should at least give us pause for thought. Because it raises the question, “What was John trying to accomplish with this story that the other gospel writers did not care about?” What indeed?

[image: Jesus healing]

It’s a bit hard to figure out. On the one hand, it’s just another story of Jesus performing a miracle. That’s the sort of thing we expect to read in the gospels, right? But I’m not so sure. Most of the miracles that Jesus was said to have performed involved healing people. That’s an action that had long-term benefits for the sick person. And the people who Jesus healed usually had already made huge efforts to find healing using more traditional methods. In those healing stories, Jesus was the last resort. But with this story of Jesus turning water into wine, the miracle seems quite frivolous really. Jesus does his magic trick before anyone even asks the host if he has more wine stashed away. This is not the last resort at all. The text does not say, “quick - more wine before the happy couple sober up and change their minds!” There is no crisis at all in this story. No problem that needs solving.

[image: barrels of wine]

And beyond that - the story is - to say the least - not very united-churchy. Here in the United Church we do not 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 guests probably needed water to combat dehydration more than they needed wine at that moment. If Jesus was just a bit more health conscious he should have encouraged the guests to drink the water as water and to take it easy on the booze. And if we read this story literally, that’s maybe about as far as we can go with it.

But there are other ways to read the story. Perhaps the story is not about wine at all. Perhaps the wine is simply a vehicle to deeper meaning. Or as the Romans said, “in vino veritas”. What does this story mean to us?

[image: hand washing]

For me, the most interesting feature of this story is that Jesus didn't just turn water into wine. He transformed water intended for use in hand-washing into wine. Jesus did not create wine out of thin air. In the story Jesus re-purposed water that was intended to service the traditional ritual of hand-washing. In Jesus's day, of course, hand washing was not done for sanitary reasons. The ritual was followed simply as one of many cultural traditions that tradition dictated must be followed.

So, one way to read this story is to recognize that ritual hand-washing was a tradition. Traditions are things that we do today because we did them yesterday. Following a tradition today is - at some level - about preserving our past. Whereas, providing adequate refreshments at a wedding party is about the present. It's about making new friends. It's about building new relationships. It's about living today. There was a shortage of resources, and Jesus decided that wine was more important than hand-washing. Jesus decided that relationships were more important than tradition.

If we read the story that way, then we see the story as a battle between the past and the present. A battle between following the rules or creating new relationships. And Jesus responds decisively. When the wine runs out, he doesn't ask the host if they have more wine hidden away. He doesn't ask someone to run out to an off-sale. Jesus - apparently without hesitation except for his dealing with his mother - chooses to honour the present relationships over the past with its rules and traditions.

Can we imagine that sort of party here - in this congregation? Can we imagine having to make a choice. And giving more value to building new relationships and building community than holding onto some of the traditions and rules of our past? What traditions are we willing to look beyond - right here? And what vision of new relationships can we imagine - right here? And are we willing to give up some of our traditions to create those new relationships?

If you are wondering what I'm talking about, let me give you a hypothetical example. How would you respond if I told you (don't worry, I'm making this up) that we would have more young people come to worship at Sydenham-Heritage United Church if we held worship on Tuesday evenings? Would we be willing to move our services to

Tuesdays in order to create those new relationships with young people? Or would we stick to our traditions?

And you can all relax, because that's not where I'm going with this sermon. The very probable truth is that the story in John was more like a battle between 2 traditions. One tradition was hand-washing. Another tradition was that the host was expected to have enough refreshments for guests. Having adequate refreshments was a tradition. I don't believe the story is really a contrast between honouring our past and creating our present. It's something even more difficult to talk about. I think It's about doing what is most important and allowing other things to take a back seat.

[image: Washington post]

I'm reminded of a true story. The Washington Post is a very old company that has produced newspapers since 1877. But as we all know, over the last decade or so newspaper sales have dropped dramatically. Many people now get their news on the radio, or TV, or online, or on their phone or tablet. For example, Marjorie and I share news stories over breakfast on our iPads. She gets stories from the CBC and the BBC. I get my stories from the Russia Today, CBC, and Aljezera. I don't even remember the last time I saw a newspaper in my home.

Anyway, with the decline in newspaper sales, the executives at The Post were naturally concerned. Some of the executives thought this was a crisis. They thought it was the end of the company. They wanted to made strategic decisions to close the company in the most profitable way. Profitable for themselves of course. Other executives really could not see what the fuss was about. They saw a problem to manage, but no crisis. And do you know what made the difference? What was it that made some executives fearful while other executives got creative? What made the difference was the type of business the executives thought they were in. Because the executives did not agree on what the core business of the Washington Post was.

Some of the executives thought that The Washington Post was a newspaper company. They made and sold newspapers after all. Of course it's a crisis if newspaper sales drop. But other executives had never thought that The Post was a newspaper company. In their minds, The Post was a media company. They collected, edited, and

assembled news stories and distributed those stories to people. For those executives, there was no crisis. Newspaper sales were down, but that only meant that they had to get creative and find other ways to get their stories out. They needed to change. But there was no crisis. Their core business (creating and sharing news stories) could continue. They could keep their core business as long as they were willing to change how the news stories were distributed.

[image: empty pews]

And this is exactly what is happening in mainline churches across North America. Even before covid. Across the board, Sunday attendance is dropping. Is this a crisis? Is this a crisis here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church? Well, if you think our core business is filling pews, then yes you must think we have a crisis. But is filling pews our core business? What if our core business is something else? Perhaps we - like The Washington Post - can change how we do things in order to preserve the reason this congregation exists in the first place. We have to change. But we do not have to close down unless we choose to.

[image: change]

And now I've used the "C" word. Change. And what do we think of the word "change" anyway? When we hear the word "change" coming from the pulpit - what do you think? Do you think that Rev. Paul will eventually get used to us and leave us alone? You do outnumber me after all. Or when you hear the word "change", do you think "not again". Or when you hear the word "change", do you think "it's about time"?

[image: altar call]

When you saw that the title for this reflection was "Alter Call" I'm sure some of you thought it was a typo. I must have meant an "Altar Call". Perhaps you hoped I would call people to the Altar to rededicate themselves, like Norm here.

[image: alter call]

But by now you all realize that the sermon title was not a typo. This is an "Alter Call" - a call to change. A call to grow into who we are supposed to be. Remember that God loves us just as we are. But God also loves us too much to leave us just as we are.

Jesus transformed water from what it was into what it needed to be. And the spirit

can help transform us from who we are into who we need to be. We need to work at it too of course.

This does not mean throwing away our past either. The key is to figure out the “essential ingredients” of this congregation so we don’t lose them while other elements - the incidental ones - can 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 maintain in order to keep being who we are? What traditions and relationships will we let go of? What traditions and relationships will we transform in order to bring new life to them?

[image: flipchart]

So now I want to hear from you. But I already have. Do you remember in the fall I put a flip chart in the church near the parking lot door. And I invited people to say what they cared about in this community. Specifically, I was trying to tease out some of the “essential ingredients” here. Do you remember those lawn signs that were popular last summer that said, “Hate has no home here”. And that’s a great message. But that statement says who we are not. So who are we? The flip chart was an opportunity for people to express who we are here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. Or perhaps, who we want to be.

[video: flipchart slo-mo]

One thing that people named was “love”. Hate does not live here. Love lives here. That’s a great start, but it’s a bit vague. Some people offered more specific words: kindness, compassion, equity, respect, acceptance, justice, understanding. And some people were brave enough to name concerns they see within this congregation: lack of respect for differing opinions, too much judgement, a feeling that some people have that they they are not free to be themselves here.

[image: butterfly]

A common thread I see running through all these ideas is Relationship. We want to be a place where people are free to bring their whole selves here, and to be in relationship with others, whether those other people are similar to us or not. We want to share our lives with each other.

What is it that makes us Sydenham-Heritage United Church? What are the “essential ingredients” that make us who we are? What is it that we need to change so that we can continue to be Sydenham-Heritage United Church in ways that work better today? Who do we want to be?

Jesus transformed water from what it was into what it needed to be. And the spirit can help us transform ourselves from who we are into who we need to be too. Working together, we can transform ourselves from who we are into who we need to be. And that’s way more impressive than turning water into wine.

Let us celebrate the gift of each other in this congregation. And let’s see what we can create here in our midst.

Amen.