
Alter Call
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 19, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 2:1-11

Who here knows what this particular Sunday is called in the church calendar? Anyone? Are you all excited because it's the Second Sunday after the Epiphany? Who brought cake today?

[image: Second Sunday after the Epiphany]

This highlights something that drives me crazy about the church. Because in general, the church is not very good at marketing. I mean who could possibly get excited because it's the "Second Sunday after the Epiphany", right? But I believe that if we advertised this Sunday properly, it would be the highlight of the year. This place would be packed. You'd need a reservation to get in the door.

Because this week, we have the story of Jesus turning water into wine. Why don't we ever celebrate that?

[image: water into wine Sunday]

Imagine if we had told people that today was "Turning Water into Wine Sunday"? You know. Everyone who comes brings a litre of water and they leave with 1 litre of wine? This Sunday could be awesome. It could be bigger than Christmas.

And even though we did not call today "Turning Water into Wine Sunday", those of you who read Chit-Chat knew that was the subject today. Who here brought any water with them, hoping for it to become wine? Anyone? I've got my water right here. Because I always expect awesome in church.

[image: water into wine]

Since none of you brought water, we will follow church tradition and discuss the story without trying to re-enact it. The story from John is very famous. This 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, which is why the story is considered part of Epiphany.

We ourselves might think of it more as a miracle. But whatever we call it, it as 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 - of "Jesus, the party animal".

[image: Jesus the party animal]

And yet, I cannot 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. Healing someone is an action that has long-term benefits for the sick person. And the people who Jesus healed usually had already made huge efforts to find healing using traditional methods. In those healing stories, Jesus is usually 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. Just a minor inconvenience. There is no problem that actually needs fixing.

[image: wine barrels]

And beyond that - the story is - to say the least - not very united-churchy. Here in the United Church of Canada we do not even use wine for communion. [That is for 2 reasons. 1) the United Church in 1925 strongly supported the temperance movement, and 2) we do not want any barriers during communion for recovering alcoholics.] 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? What does the story mean to you?
[image: hand washing]

For me, the most interesting feature of this story is that Jesus did not 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, hand washing was not done for sanitary reasons, of course. The ritual was followed simply as one of many cultural traditions that tradition dictated must be followed.

I know we discussed this story in November of last year, but I want to take the conversation in a different direction now.

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 the LCBO. Jesus - apparently without hesitation except for his dealing with his mother - chooses to honour 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 rather than holding onto some of the traditions and rules from our past? What past 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 past traditions to create those new relationships?

In fact, we have already done that. Recently. When Don Mills United Church and Thorncliffe Park United Church amalgamated to become Chapel in the Park United Church some traditions were maintained and some had to change. We have already done this to some extent. Given up some traditions ... even a building ... in order to build new relationships and create new possibilities. To be honest, I still sense some reluctance to fully blend together, but we have come a long way.

And perhaps we have to keep going in that direction. 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 people come to worship at Chapel in the Park United Church if we held worship on Tuesday evenings? And for the sake of argument, we cannot have worship on both Sunday and Tuesday - we have to pick only one. Would we choose to move our weekly worship to Tuesdays in order to create new relationships with new people? Or would we stick to our traditions?

Do we care more about preserving our past? Or do we care more about new relationships and new possibilities? Your answer might depend on what you think the purpose of this church is. I mean, why are we here?

[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, Aljezeera, and Instagram. 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 make 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 at the Washington Post did not actually 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, yes. 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 delivered.

[image: empty pews]

And this is exactly what is happening in mainline churches across North America. Even before the pandemic. Across the board, Sunday attendance is dropping. Is this a crisis? Is this a crisis here at Chapel in the Park 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 the church - like The Washington Post - can change how we do things in order to preserve the reason the church exists in the first place. We may have to change if we want to grow. But we get to decide if that is a crisis or not.

[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: repeat weekly slide]

When you saw that the title for this reflection was "Alter Call" I'm sure some of you thought it was a typo.

[image: altar call]

I must have meant an "Altar Call". Perhaps you hoped I would call people to the Altar to rededicate themselves to Jesus or something like that.

[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 probably 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 do not lose what matters while other elements - incidental ones - can change. And so I invite each of us to consider what are the "essential ingredients" of this community of faith. What traditions and relationships do we need to maintain in order to keep being who we are? What traditions and relationships can we let go of? What traditions and relationships will we transform in order to bring new life to them?

[image: who are we?]

What is it that makes us Chapel in the Park 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 Chapel in the Park United Church into the future - into our future? 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.