

NEW VISION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
1600 Mangrove Avenue, Suite 177
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11:00 -- Sunday Celebration Worship

“Saving the Best for Now”

November 29, 2015
Advent One

Preached by: Jim Peck, Pastor

Scripture Readings: John 2: 1 - 12

Will you pray with me? God, who is with us now, do a new thing with your word this morning as we seek to worship you. Amen.

For the first three Sundays in Advent, we're going to look in on some conversations Jesus has. We'll be using the Gospel of John, the fourth gospel, as our inexhaustible resource. These are not traditional Advent Bible readings.

Fortunately, the United Church of Christ gives each congregation the freedom and autonomy to decide for itself which Bible readings to use. I'm thankful for that freedom and autonomy. It's the primary reason I am in the United Church of Christ instead of some other way of being Christian.

John's Gospel is different in tone and structure and emphasis than the other three Gospels. John has fewer parables, for example, and more events and conversations. The timeline of events is somewhat different, and Jesus is more mystical.

While it might be more convenient if the early church leaders had chosen only one Gospel instead of four, it's better for our faith that they choose four. We get a more complete picture of Jesus with four than with one. We have to spend more time trying to understand him and his teachings. In other words, with four accounts and interpretations of his life instead of just one, we have to forge a relationship with him. Relationships take time and attention. Jesus is worth the time and attention.

In John, the first mighty work, or miracle, of Jesus takes place at a wedding. Jesus does not attend this wedding in the other three Gospels. In those, his first miracles are healing people who are sick. In John, he saves the couple from a lifetime of gossip and head-shaking.

We arrive with Jesus at the reception. The ceremony is over. Everyone is celebrating. There's dancing! There's food! There's wine! There's a happy couple, and happy parents, and happy family, and happy friends, everyone is happy for the couple!

It's okay at a party to serve the best food and wine first. You keep the back-ups in the kitchen for later. The spinach dip with hand-cut slices of artisanal sourdough, accompanied by the finest wine California has to offer, is served at the beginning. The plan is that people will depart over the course of the evening.

If anyone is left at the end of the party - you know who I'm talking about, those four people who, actually, are welcome at your place just any old time, and you don't mind because they'll help you clean up - if anyone is left at the end of the party, you'll bring out the discount potato chips and French onion dip in the round plastic container, and the cheap wine from, well, is cheap wine ever from an actual place? They won't mind, because they're such good friends and everyone knows that's how a party works.

A wedding reception is different than a regular party. It's supposed to be an outpouring of festivity, and you don't run out of food and wine. Maybe you bring out some wine of a lesser quality, but you don't run out. Unfortunately, that's what starts happening at the wedding feast at Cana. They are running out of wine.

The Bible doesn't tell us whose wedding this is. We get to use our imaginations. In seminary, I had a couple of classmates who argued it was Jesus's own wedding, that he was the groom. We have no evidence from any source, the Bible or otherwise, that Jesus was married. Besides, if Jesus was the groom, the story would not describe another groom. This is not Jesus's wedding.

On the other hand, the caterers would not have come to Mary, Jesus's mother, with the dwindling wine problem, if she had no role or responsibility for the reception. This problem is not one for the guests. It's one for the hosts. Even in the Middle East of 2000 years ago, the parents of the bride are the hosts at the wedding reception.

So, over the years, my imagination has led me to imagine the bride is one of Jesus's sisters. The Bible tells us Jesus had siblings. We believe Joseph, Mary's husband, died when Jesus was a teenager. Joseph is not mentioned in the Gospels after Jesus is 12 or 13. That would mean that as Joseph's oldest son, Jesus was responsible for the well-being of his mother and siblings until that responsibility could be passed to a younger brother, or to a brother-in-law.

While the Bible does not tell us whose wedding it is, I have come to think the bride is Jesus's sister and the groom is the brother-in-law who has promised to take care of Mary and the younger children. This would free Jesus to begin his ministry.

The caterer comes to Mary and says "We're running out of wine." Mary goes to Jesus and says "We're running out of wine. It will take a miracle to get enough wine for all these people!" Jesus says, "Woman, what is that to me? My time has not yet come," meaning, "How is that my problem? I'm not in the miracle-making mode yet."

I do imagine Mary gives him a pointed look, one of those, "You could do it if you wanted to" kinds of looks mothers give their sons. Then she tells the caterer, "Do whatever he tells you." Then she goes back to being the mother of the bride.

I had an older sister. She died 39 years ago yesterday. She was 26. She had a rare nervous system disease. By the time she was 18, she had to use a wheelchair - she finished high school

in a wheelchair. By the time I was 13 and she was 21, I would have done pretty much anything for Katherine. She was bright and pleasant and cheerful and smart, and I would have done anything for her. If someone had said the cure for her disease is on the tenth floor but there is no elevator, I would have gotten her to the tenth floor.

I think that's what happened to Jesus. It really doesn't matter whether the bride was his sister or not. I think he looked at the couple, and he looked at the crowd, and he noticed the gossips on the far side of the room, and he saw how happy everyone was, and he said, "Actually, now would be a good time for a miracle."

The urns were used for water. These were big urns, holding 20 or 30 gallons each. Six times 30 is 180 gallons of water. The water they held was used for rituals of purification and cleansing. This water was not for drinking. It was holy water.

Jesus ordered the urns filled with water. The text does not say how it happened. Jesus does not say "Become wine!" Jesus does not touch the water. He just says take a sample to the caterer.

It's wine, and it's good wine, the best wine, the best for last, the best for now. And it's not just the best wine, it is enough to last beyond the party. At 6 ounces per serving, 180 gallons of wine is 3,840 glasses of wine!

Sure, literally, you'll eventually run out. Symbolically, that's enough of the best to last a lifetime.

At the beginning of the story, Jesus says he's not ready to change people's lives. At the end of the story, he's changed people's lives. Exactly how did he change people's lives, you might ask?

Saving the cheap wine for last is nothing unusual. It's what people expect. No one, not even the gossips on the other side of the room, would talk about that.

But running out of wine completely is bad. That's going to get you talked about. And it wouldn't just be the gossips on the other side of the room. Everyone would have talked about it. For years.

Whenever the bride would greet the neighbors in the market, whenever the husband would deal with a customer in the carpenter's shop, no matter how pleasant the exchange, someone would be thinking, "Nice couple. Too bad they ran out of wine." Oh, they'd never say it directly to their face. Sometimes, though, the townspeople might say to one another, "I remember when they ran out of wine, don't you?" Sometimes, the couple would overhear it. Always, it would hurt just a bit.

I think Jesus decided he couldn't let that happen. So he turned water into wine, the best wine, the best for now, and people are still talking about what a great wedding that was, and what a nice couple, and isn't it nice to see two people so happy. Yes, people are still talking about them, even us.

I do not subscribe to the idea of living only for today. I think living only for today is selfish and short-sighted. I also do not subscribe to living only for yesterday or only for tomorrow. But, if we truly live only for today, if we would dismiss yesterday as having nothing to teach us, or we dismiss tomorrow as not our problem, we are being irresponsible with our lives and with the gifts God has given us.

Most of my clergy colleagues do not like doing weddings. There are lots of reasons for that. I love doing weddings. I love spending time with the couple, getting to know them, and hearing them talk about the future, the future they are going to have together. They come to that moment saying to each other, "I cannot imagine a future without you." Even couples who have been together for decades, same-sex couples who couldn't marry before the law changed, look at each other and say, "I cannot imagine a future with you."

I love doing weddings because they are about the future. They are about the now that comes next, which has every possibility of being the best now ever.

The first Sunday of Advent is the Sunday for hope. Hope is an orientation to the future. Hope is a story we write about tomorrow. Despair is a story we write about tomorrow, too, but Jesus teaches us that hope, not despair, endures. He taught us in his words, and he taught us in his actions, that hope, God's vision for a better world, God's vision for a different tomorrow story, one of peace and justice, endures.

And remember this. Water is always being turned into wine. Rain falls on the vineyards. It soaks the soil. It is drawn up through the roots, up into the stem, out through the branches, all the way to the grape way out at the end. Water is always slowly being turned into wine.

Despite appearances, the better world God hopes for, and calls us to work for, does emerge.

Amen.

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