

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11
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The picture of the boy on the front page of the Times Dispatch last Thursday captures the despair and desperation of those living in Haiti's capital after the recent earthquake. The boy and a young woman are sitting on a roadside curb covered in cement dust with the saddest of expressions on their faces.

A news program just the Monday before had carried a story about the positive impact of international investment in Port-au-Prince to stimulate new job creation in this poorest of countries. Factories closed from years of corrupt leadership and lawlessness from gang domination were opening again as UN Peacekeepers patrolled the streets and maintained order. Hope and optimism were slowly taking hold. And then the ground heaved in violent spasms. Our prayers must be in the language of the Isaiah lesson today that a land clearly "forsaken" and "desolate" can with the help of God and the human community realize a new dawn, be called by a new name and become a crown of beauty.

In direct contrast to the sadness and misery evoked by the news from Haiti, John places Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee early in his gospel. For people who lived with daily hardship in small Palestinian villages, weddings were times to pull out all the stops and party for several days. Unfortunately, on this particular occasion, the keg was sputtering and the bar was closing unless someone could call up the Clydesdales or make a dash to the 24-hour Food Lion. Time was of the essence since having to resort to iced tea or powdered lemonade would have brought shame and embarrassment upon the newlyweds and their families.

It may not have been Mother Mary's place to bail out the responsible party's blunder, but her compassionate instincts propelled her into action. She turns to Jesus to remedy things much like we here turn to Rick Talmage when something needs fixing. We might assume from Mary's action that her husband, Joseph, has indeed died, and she has turned to her oldest son for help for many years now.

But Jesus has just embarked on his new venture. He has even called disciples. He can no longer be at this mother's beck and call. He indicates that his orders will be from God from here on out when he retorts, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

Scholars help us translate John's frequent use of loaded symbolic language throughout his gospel. In his case, Jesus' "hour" is when he will fully disclose his true identity as Messiah and Son of God. Ultimately, that will be when Jesus is crucified, raised and ascended. Saving a wedding on the verge of collapse is not what Jesus thought God had in mind for him. However, when his mother ignores his respectful resistance to her concern and request, he more than meets the immediate social emergency. Not only does Jesus produce obligatory libations, but it is the best wine yet and in quantities that far surpass the need.

A Bible study member called this a “wasted miracle,” because its purpose seemed somewhat frivolous, limited and witnessed by few. You may agree except that John has ulterior motives for this seemingly “wasted miracle.” John injects this backwater wedding event with grand theological importance.

The stone jars for Jewish purification represent the old ways of doing things. The rituals of hand washing prescribed in the Law were required for one to be in a right relationship with God. They had to be repeated before every meal and even between courses. According to John, Jesus himself represented the new way to God. The new and better wine was far superior to the old religion which had become diluted and tainted by far too much reliance on rule keeping. Jesus enabled direct access to the holy and an abundance of grace.

With Jesus, the party can continue as it was intended from the beginning with celebration and exhilaration, brim full and overflowing. The chief steward’s announcement that the bridegroom has surprised everyone by “having kept the good wine until now” is in fact the main point of this multi-layered incident. At this time in the life of Israel and the world, God has sent his son to elevate the level of human potential and further the peaceable community. Jesus will show us how we were intended to live from the beginning. Belief in him will help us accomplish our maximum potential – the kingdom of God.

Later when the spirit is unleashed upon believers, sometimes described as new wine, each person will display and offer gifts for the good of all. Only as we all use the unique gifts that each of us is and has can the purposes of God for this world be fulfilled. The problem in Corinth, which St. Paul addressed in his letter, was that people were using the various gifts to promote themselves, which created conflict not harmony. He will have to later write that the gift of love must take precedence over all others.

Even now gifted professionals and volunteers are pouring into Port-au-Prince with varieties of skills to provide for the manifold needs of badly wounded, traumatized, displaced, grieving and orphaned human beings. The local church needs each member participating willingly and joyfully at a level beyond just coming on Sunday to worship. Thankfully, Christ and Grace is a vibrant church because nearly everyone does do more for the good of all.

Our collect for today makes it clear that you and I are to be illumined and to shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory. Epiphany is not only about the manifestation of the holy in and through Jesus, but also the manifestation of the holy in and through us. We are to present to the world a new and better wine such that when people encounter us or “taste us” they are surprised by our abundant attentiveness and helpfulness. Do our lives display genuine transformation? Are we allowing Jesus to turn our lives from ordinary water to good wine for others sake? These are Epiphany questions to ask ourselves. Will we accept that we are deeply accepted by God?

Two final notes on the wedding of Cana: In the end, no one except Jesus, his mother and a few servants knew who was responsible for the fresh batch of primo vino. All the guests assumed it was the bridegroom who made this wedding better than all the rest.

When we're fully transformed, we won't need anyone to know the good we've done, the lives we've saved or the parties we have rescued, because to God alone belongs all the credit. And in a very real sense, we are all the bridegroom – recipients of innumerable gifts of grace upon grace from one who is more than willing to perform seemingly “wasted miracles” solely because he loves us so very much. Amen.