

“No Two Buck Chuck”

John 2:1-11

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San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

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Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the presence of God and in this community of family, friends, and faith to unite this man and this woman in Christian marriage; which is a holy covenant, instituted by God, and signifying unto us the relationship of faith, hope, and love which exists between Christ and the Church, which holy covenant Christ adorned and beautified by his presence at the celebration in Cana of Galilee, where he turned the water of life into the wine of joy!

These are the opening words to the “traditional” liturgy of many wedding ceremonies. But as I’ve officiated at weddings over the years, I’ve learned that now days most people have never heard the story of Jesus’ turning the water of life into the wine of joy at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. So when I meet with couples, I give choices in liturgies so that the couple’s wedding doesn’t include words that are meaningless to them or to their friends who attend. Weddings are all wrapped up in signs, symbols, and rituals that hold special meanings which may not literally make much sense but that within their context have great spiritual and emotional significance. Signs, symbols, and rituals are very important to us as humans trying to make sense of our lives.

The gospel of John recognizes this, and so John, more than any other gospel, uses the inspiration of signs, symbols, and rituals in explaining the life of Jesus. By the time John’s gospel is written, these signs, symbols, and rituals have become even more important to a congregation who is living at least 70 years after Jesus walked the earth. Today’s scripture is Jesus’ first of seven signs within John’s gospel. It is a story about quantity and quality, about a whole lot of the very best, and I should say that this quantity is not material stuff but something much more important. It is about the abundance of the power and love of God within all the events of our lives.

At first, Jesus appears to react to his mother as my children do when I highlight their special gifts and talents in a social situation. There’s a tinge of retreat when Mary first points to Jesus as *the one* who can solve the problem of no more wine at the wedding. But after first resisting his mother’s request, Jesus can’t ignore the problem at hand, and wine flows abundantly, and the headwaiter proclaims, that this wine is “No, two buck Chuck!” For those of you not familiar with this phrase, “two buck Chuck” is the popular Charles Shaw wine sold at Trader Joe’s for only \$1.99. Jesus’ wine is “no two buck Chuck.” Jesus provides the best. Jesus is the vessel by which the wedding party and symbolically, our lives are provided with abundance and blessing.

An interesting part of this story is that Jesus uses the large stone jars holding water for temple purification rites in order to provide this abundance of wine. Symbolically this suggest to me that the tangible stuff that creates church is to be used for the needs of the people. Church buildings are to be used for the people of God to do God’s work. Beautiful “things” are only beautiful if their importance does not supersede the needs of people and mission. And in this story Jesus doesn’t hesitate to use jars designated for temple use when the people need to be served. Jesus does away with the separation of what belongs to temple and what belongs in daily life. It all belongs to God and as such is utilized for the needs of God’s people. Temple jars become vessels of celebration and life! This first “sign” that Jesus performs in John’s gospel is a lesson in God’s great desire for abundance and quality of life full and abundant for all creation.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. As a country we celebrate him because he moved our nation away from segregation and discrimination towards civil rights. But as church we also celebrate that King was a powerful preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He took the stone jars that belonged to the church and used them to proclaim life abundant for all God's people. He helped us realize that the temple of God serves the people of God, and thus, he mobilized churches and church people to shout out the quality and quantity of God's love which was not limited to those in power or those of a certain skin color. King proclaimed in ways we could hear, using symbols and signs we recognized, that God doesn't want some folks to have expensive wine while others have only two buck Chuck; but God provides the best wine for everyone, and God provides more than enough for all.

The United Church of Christ was a strong ally of King's in this proclamation. We were only a few years old as a denomination, yet our pastors rode on the freedom train; our pastors and lay people walked with King on the freedom march between Selma and Montgomery; our pastors were arrested and jailed because they joined King in saying God's love flows freely for all God's people. Church became a vessel for the power of God in a broken world. Church was a means for miracles so the water of life became the wine of joy.

So the question I think about is how are we as church to be used, like those stone jars of the temple, to let God's love flow freely in our world, in our time. Who are the disenfranchised today? Who's left out? Who's discriminated against? What social problems would Jesus attack today? What injustice would he speak to? How would Jesus say through his words and deeds that there's plenty of wine to go around and it's good wine, it's "no two buck Chuck."

I am reminded of another story told by Father John Westerhoff. Father John was a priest at an Episcopal church in Durham, North Carolina, where Duke University is located. One year as the fall semester began, a friend of his called and said he was sending his daughter, a new freshman at Duke, to see Father John. Not long after the call, a young woman, who clearly had been coerced by her father to visit the local priest, came to see him. She was determined not to be drawn into church life, and she started the conversation by saying first off that she thought all churches were hypocritical. Father John said, "OK, I know your dad made you come to see me, so now that I know where you stand on things, do you at least want to look around?"

The young woman said that she might as well; she was already there. So the priest showed her around the large church campus which was pretty much like the young woman expected until they came to the social hall. There in a beautifully decorated and appointed social hall were a large number of women, all dressed properly in southern fashion, playing bridge and sharing high tea. But over against the wall on a very nice sofa, a man was asleep and snoring loudly, and he was not well dressed and the odor of liquor could be sensed. The young woman was caught by the disparity of the scene. The priest asked the women having tea who the man was; and the women said, "Oh, he's all right; he just needs to sleep awhile."

This dirty, drunk man had been welcomed by the women to attend to his need for sleep even in the fine social hall of this city church. The young visitor decided that if the church allowed this man in, then perhaps they weren't all as hypocritical as she had judged them to be, and she decided she could give that church a try. Father John's parish had learned that church exists to serve the people. The Rev. Dr. King knew that church at its best could be a vessel of hope and reformation. Jesus showed through sign and symbol that temple jars could be used to bring joy and celebration. The question for us today, is how may we use this temple, this church, to be God's power in the world. Jesus teaches us that God intends for all to have abundant.

God's wine of joy is plentiful, and it is no two buck Chuck, but the best wine of all. Thanks be to God!