

“No Two Buck Chuck” (take two) John 2:1-11 January 17, 2010

Of all the sermons I’ve preached, this sermon, perhaps because of its title, has received the most attention. The first half is what I preached 3 years ago; but in the second half I have tried to relate this text to today’s issues.

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 nowadays 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 them choices of liturgies so that a couple’s wedding doesn’t include words that have little meaning to them or to their friends who attend. Weddings are all wrapped up in signs, symbols, and rituals that 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 in any other gospel, uses signs, symbols, and rituals to tell the story 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 point with pride to their special gifts and talents; in other words, when I’m bragging about them. Jesus shows a tinge of retreat when Mary first points to *him* as *the one* who can solve the problem that the wine has run out before the party’s over. But after first resisting his mother’s request, Jesus doesn’t ignore the problem, and wine flows abundantly, and the headwaiter proclaims, that this wine is “No two buck Chuck!” “Two buck Chuck” is the popular 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.

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses the large stone jars holding water for temple purification rites to hold this new wine. Symbolically this reminds us 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. This first “sign” that Jesus performs in John’s gospel is a lesson in God’s longing for abundance and goodness of life 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 discrimination and 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 with 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.

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 people walked 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 the water of life to become 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."

Of the qualities I consider important as a person of faith, generosity is near the top of the list. When everyone else is worrying about what they want (not need), what they look like, what status they want to acquire or sustain, or how they can get rich, people of faith are concerned that there's enough wine (i.e. God's love) for everyone and that it doesn't run out. People of faith are concerned with the people of Haiti and how they can give to relieve unimaginable suffering. People of faith are worried about sustaining the church for their children and their children's children. People of faith are concerned about God's justice in a world where civil rights continue to be denied.

Well, this week, I think, I would not have made King proud. I was asked by a person (who I much admire and didn't want to disappoint), what I thought about the marriage equality trial going on. I fumbled my words and said what a difficult issue this is, and then afterwards, I was ashamed. So this is what I really think...and you don't have to agree with me. If we were to take the few verses in the Bible at face value that have been used to judge homosexuality; then I believe we would have to take the verses that clearly encourage slaves to be happy as slaves and the verses that clearly encourage women to be silent in church as gospel truth as well. Many of us accept that the Bible speaks to a 1st-century culture with some quite different social more's. And even in the Bible marriage has not always been about one man and one woman; sometimes it's more than one woman; it's been about property and purity of royal lines and in recent years, procreation has not always been the main reason for marriage. Marriage is about love; it's about being honest about yourself; it's about making and keeping commitments; it's about sharing the most precious moments of life with one's soul mate.

I believe that when we hear said that "they shouldn't need to make such a big deal about it" it's like saying, I shouldn't have to declare my love for Tom, or that I shouldn't have to baptize my child so the world can witness my intentions and love for her, or that I shouldn't have to be public about burying my mother. It's like holding onto those sacred stone jars because we're afraid of being impure. But Jesus is bold, relying on God's grace, and chooses to go beyond the sacred past for the sake of sharing God's wine of joy abundantly. Jesus teaches us through word and deed, symbol and sign, that God's wine of joy is plentiful and to be shared, and it is certainly no "two buck Chuck," but the best wine of all. Thanks be to God!