

“Where You Might See God”

John 2:1-11

The first thing Jesus says in the gospel of John is, “What are you looking for?” It’s how he opens his instruction with his new disciples. Classic move for a Rabbi— begin with a question. Not just any question. This is the question that frames our search for life... our search for God. We might assume that after Jesus calls his disciples he would take them some place holy like the temple or to some holy place to train them; maybe even off by themselves in the desert or something. Instead, he takes them to a party. And in that obscure ordinary place— Cana— an epiphany of God takes place. You never know where you might see God.

You may have heard this story before. The story of Jesus’ first miracle is well known. But, go deep into this story and look at the world from the perspective it provides. The abundance of this miracle is meant to reveal the world God has created; a world we obscure with fear and scarcity. The pots for the cleansing ritual in Judaism would have held about 180 gallons of water. And all that

water is turned to wine. That’s a lot of wine. That’s a few bathtubs full of wine. It’s an absurd (almost hilarious) amount. And what’s more— the wine for the party is stored in the sacred vessels used for Jewish purity rituals. Imagine if we filled the baptistry with spiked punch? How would the deacons react?

When I first came to Woodland... back when I was a young pastor... I met in the first few months with the infamous Clo McGill. A lifelong nurse and philosopher. At 88 she could still lecture on Heidegger and the intricacies of bio science. Like Jesus— Clo was never very interested in traditional expectations or genteel religious culture. As a young nurse she once gave an impromptu lesson on the human reproductive system to a 4th grade class at Vacation Bible School. It was the last time she was asked to teach. Clo gave me 4 pages of handwritten instructions for her funeral. These instructions included a New Orleans jazz band to lead the family and congregation to the funeral reception party in Maresh Hall where a keg of Miller

Lite would be waiting. I told her if we did this for my sake we better hope Jesus was coming back soon.

Jesus restores a vision of purity for his disciples, but it's not one of washing and being made clean. He repurposes the cleansing vessels into vessels of celebration. Vessels of celebration might be a metaphor for our lives with Jesus. To some the sudden appearance of an abundance of wine might sound bawdy and irreverent, but to Jesus this is grace. Jesus isn't trying to encourage the kind of drunkenness that destroys lives through addiction; he is trying to discourage self-righteousness. In place of rituals that celebrate justification and self-righteousness he inaugurates a party to celebrate the grace of covenantal love. In other words—Jesus' starting place with his disciples is not shame or guilt— it's gratefulness. In place of listing sins and begging forgiveness Jesus calls his disciples to begin with a toast. "Cheers! And Lord have mercy."

Those old pots at the wedding symbolize the old order, implying the old ways have lost their impact and vitality. How often do we focus so much on the vessels of faith

that we lose sight of the stuff it holds. We lose sight of the God to which these elements point. The ancient Hebrew prophets used wine as a symbol for restoration, and in particular, for the ultimate restoration in the new era to come. Mary knew this. And she taught it to her son. And she saw through the moment to what God can do with ordinary everyday stone pot.

We aren't looking for those old stone pots— not in the old ways. God is doing something new. Sometimes we inadvertently worship the means of faith— it provides a sense of certainty. We focus so much on the rituals and elements of our faith that we lose sight of the God to which these things are meant to point. So we use these elements as a crutch to hold up a faith we don't really possess. When your religion demands certainty you can be certain it lacks faith. Because if you're certain of something you don't need faith... or trust. Our longing for certainty leads us to give celebrity pastors more authority than they deserve. Sometimes we end of worshiping the bible... making an idol of the very things that is meant to lead us to faith. It is Christ that transforms what's inside... all we, his

servants, can do is fill the vessels. We might be surprised by the results.

What we are looking for is not the stone pots. We long for the celebration the Christ makes possible. Just because we fill pots with water doesn't make it wine. The Kingdom of God comes in its own time. That's part of what Jesus is saying to Mary here. He's not being rude— in English this verse sounds rude— “Woman, what concern is that to you...” But, in the original Greek Jesus is actually being overly formal, “Madame, what concern is that to you...” We don't own God's powers... yet, we are stewards of his gifts. And what we come to learn in this story is that when we are celebrating the goodness in which we live we find that our cups are never empty.

A few years ago we did the “*young family with kids obligatory trip to Disneyworld*”. Disney is the place dreams come true, right? Every day there's a parade. We saw a musical drama about dreams coming true, which the Disney characters presented in front of the big castle. Into all this optimism comes the evil Maleficent, who scorns dreams and tells them that

the world is only a nightmare. Mickey Mouse enters again to ask the children to help him by going deep into their hearts and believing that dreams do come true. When enough of us truly believe, it will happen. And of course all the children promise to believe, and Maleficent is driven away. This is the message we get from the world. At Christmastime Macy's told us to believe! Believe and you will get what you want. Believe in Santa and he will give you the goods. In the new year we are told to believe in our efforts to lose weight or eat right. But, it's never quite as good as we had hoped. We drink in all that optimism believing that it will fill us... but, it never does. That's all the world has to offer, and we know it isn't enough. Optimism is different from hope. Optimism is a luxury. Hope is what's left over long after optimism has left... hope is what's left over when dreams are crushed and the pots are empty. This is Martin Luther King weekend— he wasn't driven by optimism. Optimism can't stand up to the water canons and police dogs. Hope can. He and the civil rights movement were anchored in the hope of that Jewish rabbi who filled those empty pots in Cana with the best wine.

We are still figuring out the gift given at Christmas... that's what the season after the Epiphany is all about. It asks that we answer the question Jesus asks his disciples — What are you looking for. Even when our pots are empty there is still hope if our hope is in the right place — not in the magic of believing but in the presence of the one who is *Immanuel*, God with us. He is the one who has the power to turn our nothing into something.

Bathtubs full of the best wine appearing out of nowhere is a sign of what the new age Jesus ushers in will be like. It will be surprising and it will be joyful. Like a great feast there will be celebration, joy and community. Even now as you look around you might see signs like this sign. Signs of grace. What are we looking for?

Last week at Don Anderson's funeral the choir sang the Hallelujah chorus at the end. A classic expression of gratefulness to God. But, the greater hallelujah came before the service. One of our newer members John Ramsey showed up to sing; he didn't know Don. Thinking that he should know something about the man whose funeral he is about to sing at he

read the obituary while he put on his choir robe. It was then that he realized he knew Don's daughter Cheryl. They were in church together at Wildwood Baptist in Spring, TX where the illustrious Rev. Dr. Michael Massar was pastor. Cheryl told me the rest of the story. When Cheryl's husband left her and they got divorced, she had an infant son and a part-time job at the church nursery making minimum wage. John gave her a job at his company. He said come and see if this is something for you. She's been in that field ever since and her son followed her into the same business.

Last year my cousin and his wife adopted an infant son. After a decade of trying to have a baby and trying adopt a baby — adoptions falling through — Hayes finally came to them. Many of you know the pain of that kind of waiting... waiting for an empty crib to be filled... like those empty pots at Cana.

Hayes is now about 15 months old. A few weeks ago my whole family was together at the wedding of one of my other cousins. The wedding was in Waco. The whole family was there for the party. And Hayes

was in the middle of things. Evidently, that toddler loves to dance. With big people all around him he toddled all around the dance floor keeping the beat. And then he would slow down for a moment and look up into the lights with a calm unfazed toddler face covering one eye with one hand and pointing towards the heavens with the other hand. It looked like he was having a transcendent moment. I kept wondering what he saw that we couldn't see. His mother knew. Mothers have a way of cutting to the core of things—they see what's happening deep within each moment. Even Jesus had a mother like that. And Hayes' mom could tell what he was doing. He was copying the photographers — who were raising their hands to get his attention and using their other hand to hold the camera to their eye. And we had to laugh and dance with him. Because this is grace upon grace.