
Alter Call
Martin Grove United Church
January 20, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 2:1-11

Today we have a gospel reading I'd really rather just ignore. That is our tradition in church, right? We ignore the biblical texts that we don't like? But I suppose since those of you here had to fight your way through a snow storm to get here, I should at least pretend to put some effort into this. And besides, this is the famous story from the gospel of John where Jesus finds himself at a wedding, and finds himself completely surrounded by no wine. So he simply makes some. In the story, this is referred to as a sign, a sign that Jesus was the son of God. We ourselves might think of it more as a miracle. But whatever we call it, it was a surprise.

Even so, I am tempted to just forget the whole thing. Or at the very least, I'm tempted to keep the conversation about this story at a highly abstract, theological, theoretical level. Because I'm not sure I want to engage with a story where Jesus talks back to his mother and encourages the over-consumption of alcohol. John may have had some lofty theological objectives in writing the text, but in the end, we are left with the story - as one of my seminary professors called it - of "Jesus, the party animal".

And yet, I can't leave the story at an abstract level. For one thing, the historicity of this story is far from clear. That is, of course, the politically correct way of saying that many scholars do not believe that the story happened at all. And the fact that the story only appears in the gospel of John and in none of the other gospels should at least give us pause for thought. If nothing else, it raises the question, "What was John trying to accomplish with this story, that the other gospel writers did not care about?" What indeed?

It's a bit hard to figure out. On the one hand, it's just another story of Jesus performing a miracle. That's the sort of thing we expect to read in the gospels, right? But perhaps not. Most of the miracles that Jesus was said to perform were about healing people, an action that had long-term benefits for the sick person. And the people who

Jesus healed had usually already made a huge effort to find healing using more traditional methods, so Jesus was like their last resort. But with the story of Jesus turning water into wine, there is no particular value to the miracle - it seems quite frivolous really. And Jesus does his magic trick before anyone even asks the host if he has more wine somewhere else. This is not the last resort at all. The text does not say, “quick - more wine before the bride sobers up and changes her mind!” There is no crisis at all.

And beyond that - the story is - to say the least - not very united-churchy. Here in the United Church we don't even use wine for communion, and here is Jesus giving out free wine by the gallon. Since the host ran out of wine we have to imagine that everyone at the party was already soused. Why give them even more wine? The guests probably needed water to combat dehydration more than they needed more wine at that moment. If Jesus was just a bit more united-churchy, we would expect him to encourage the guests to drink the water in its original form and to take it easy on the booze.

But perhaps there are other ways to read the story. Perhaps the story is not about wine at all, but is really about something else entirely. Perhaps the wine is simply a vehicle to deeper meaning - or as the Romans said - “in vino veritas”. What does this story mean to us?

[ask people: what does this story mean to you?]

For me, the most interesting feature of this story is that Jesus didn't just turn water into wine, he transformed water intended for use in the ritual of hand-washing into wine. Jesus didn't create wine out of thin air. In the story Jesus creates wine out of water that was intended to service a long-standing traditional ritual of hand-washing. In Jesus's day, of course, hand washing was not done for sanitary reasons, the ritual was followed simply as one of many cultural traditions that tradition dictated must be followed.

So, one way to read this story is to recognize that ritual hand-washing was a tradition. And traditions are always about our past. Traditions are things that we do today because we did them yesterday. Following a tradition today is - at some level - about preserving our past. Whereas, providing adequate refreshments at a wedding party is about the present. It's about making new friends. It's about building new relationships. It's about living today. Providing more wine was about honouring the

present. Providing more wine was about relationships, not rules.

If we read the story that way, then we see the story as a battle between the past - and rules - and the present - and relationships. And Jesus responds decisively. When the wine runs out, he doesn't ask the host if they have more wine hidden away. He doesn't ask someone to run out to an off sale. Jesus - apparently without hesitation except for his dealing with his Mother - chooses to honour the present and relationships over the past with its rules and traditions.

Can we imagine that sort of party here - in this congregation? Can we imagine having to make a choice, and giving more value to building new relationships and building community than holding onto some of the traditions and rules of our past? What traditions are we willing to look beyond - right here? And what vision of new relationships can we imagine - right here? What are we willing to give up or transform and what might we expect to gain in exchange? In particular, what new relationships are we open to? Are there new relationships within this congregation or with the community that we look forward to? Are there some that we fear? Are there some that need transformation to bring new life? If you are wondering what I'm talking about - how would you respond if I told you (I'm making this up) that we would have more people come to worship at Martin Grove United Church if we did it on a Tuesday? Would we be willing to move our service to Tuesdays in order to create those new relationships? Or would we stick to our traditions?

But you can all relax, because that's not where I'm going with this sermon. The very probable truth is that it was more like a battle between 2 traditions. One tradition was hand-washing. Another tradition was that the host was expected to have enough refreshments for the guests. Wedding parties lasted for days, but that was normal. Having adequate refreshments was also a tradition. So I don't believe the story is really a contrast between honouring our past and creating our present. It's something even more difficult to talk about. It's about doing what is most important and allowing other things fade into the background.

I'm reminded of a true story. The story is probably true for any number of newspaper companies, but it was definitely true for the Washington Post. The Post is a

very old company that has produced newspapers since 1877. But over the last decade or so, as you know, all newspaper sales have slipped dramatically. Most people now get their news on the radio, or TV, or online, or on their phone or tablet. For example, Marjorie and I share news stories over breakfast - she gets stories from the CBC and the BBC. I get my stories from the CBC and from Russia Today. I don't even remember the last time I saw a newspaper in my home.

Anyway, with the decline in newspaper sales, the executives of The Post were naturally concerned. Some executives thought it was the end of the company and made strategic decisions to close the company in the most profitable way - for them. Other executives really couldn't see what the fuss was about. And do you know what made the difference? What was it that made some executives fearful while other executives were completely non-stressed? What made the difference was what type of business the executives thought they were in.

Some of the executives thought that The Post was a newspaper company. They made and sold newspapers. Of course it's a crisis if sales drop. But other executives had never thought that The Post was in the newspaper business. In their minds, The Post was a communications company that collected, edited, and assembled news stories and distributed those stories to people. For those executives, there was no crisis. Newspaper sales were down, but that only meant that they had to find other ways to get their stories out - and pay the bills of course. They needed to find ways to change, but there was no crisis. Their core business (creating and sharing news stories) could continue as it had always done. They could keep their core business as long as they were willing to change the "detail" of how they communicated.

And now this story sounds very suspiciously like what is happening in mainline churches in North America. Across the board, Sunday attendance is dropping. Is this a crisis? Well, if you think our core business is filling pews, then yes you must think we have a crisis. But what if our core business is not filling pews. What if our core business is something else? Perhaps we - like The Post - can change the details of how we do things in order to preserve the reason this congregation is here in the first place. Even then, of course, we need to make changes. (Can you tell that I've started working on my

contribution to the Annual Report?)

And what do we think of the word “change” anyway? When we hear the word “change” in church - what do you think of? Do you think that Rev. Paul will eventually get used to us and leave us alone, remembering that you outnumber me? When you hear the word “change”, do you think “not again” ... or do you think “it’s about time”?

And yet, just as Jesus changed water into wine, the spirit can transform us from what we have been to what we need to be. The key is to figure out the “essential ingredients” of this congregations so we don’t lose them while other elements - the frivolous ones - are allowed to change.

And now perhaps you all realize that the sermon title was not a typo. This is an “Alter Call” - a call to change. Remember that God loves us just as we are, but God also loves us too much to leave us just as we are.

And so I invite each of us to consider what the “essential ingredients” of this community of faith are. What traditions and relationships do we need to maintain in order to keep being who we are? What traditions and relationships are we willing to let go of? What traditions and relationships are we willing to transform in order to bring new life to them?

What is it that makes us Martin Grove United Church? What are the “essential ingredients” that make us who we are? What is it that we need to change so that we still be Martin Grove United Church in the future?

Amen.