

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia
Epiphany II

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

You just never know what is coming around the next corner. I had been looking forward to working on a sermon about Jesus changing water into wine. It is one of the great stories of the Epiphany Season, along with the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration. And, I'll get to this wonderful story, this sign, of the water and the wine.

But first, let me say, that as I was sitting down to spend some quality time with the Scripture there was a ding on my computer, indicating a message had just come it. So I went, "Squirrel" and chased it down. And... I learned that the Episcopal Church has been suspended from full participation in the Anglican Communion for a period of three years.

Apparently we will not have a voice in decision making for a time, up until the next General Convention of the Episcopal Church, when the church as a whole can speak in response to this suspension.

Now, as you probably know, "The (Anglican) Communion, (the world's third largest Christian denomination according to the Washington Post and of which the Episcopal Church is a part) has been divided globally and in the United States for years over issues from gay rights to women's ordination to how to read the

Bible.”¹ Indeed in our own Diocese there has been a long process of litigation over church property, successfully concluded in my opinion.

Interestingly in the lawsuits here in Virginia, the relationship of the Episcopal Church to the Anglican Communion was an important part of the conversation. And, after listening to all the arguments, the judge, who just happened to be Jewish, said, “Best I can tell the Anglican Communion is just a state of mind.” And you know, that might just hit the nail on the head.

The Anglican Communion is like an extended family, all somehow related to the Church of England but the different parts of the family have no legal authority over the other parts of the family. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church where the Bishop of Rome and the Vatican set policy for everyone, the Anglican Communion is a much looser confederation. And regardless of whether the Episcopal Church has an official seat at the table over the next three years, there is simply no way our heritage can be denied.

Let me say, I love my Anglican heritage. I love the connection with an international and diverse group of Christians. I love the Prayer Book tradition, which is distinctly Anglican and a great gift of Anglicanism to the church as a whole. I love the “via media” ...the middle way we’ve found, where are reformed but also catholic.

And, regardless of any suspensions, I am still part...we are still part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. My baptism and yours is still valid. The Holy Eucharist and the prayers we offer are still valid. We will work through this.

Change is difficult and happens in different ways in different places. And so we will just have to find ways to continue the dialogue, across huge cultural divides. After all, we are trying to find common ground with some people who live in places where women are second class citizens and where, by law, people with homosexual orientation are criminals and their human rights denied. We used to be there in the US ...not that we are perfect, but we have come a ways...but there is no place for arrogance. Let us all pray that we can find a way to stay together, in terms of the polity of the Anglican Communion.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/01/14/anglican-communion-suspends-the-episcopal-church-for-3-years-from-committees/>

Regardless, the spiritual unity remains and I celebrate it. I believe that which unites us is much greater than what divides. I would say this not just about the Anglican Communion but about my sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church and on it goes.

And one very powerful thing that unites us all is the miraculous, mysterious, graceful transforming power of God. And that brings us to the gospel for today.

The story of the water being changed into wine is a sign. It points beyond itself to a greater truth. In this instance, it is pointing to Jesus as the one who is the transforming power of God.

There were six stone jars each holding twenty or thirty gallons. The water was there so that the appropriate ritual cleansing of hands could occur prior to the wedding meal. Remember, they had no concept of germs back then...this was a proper religious thing to do.

To give you a sense of this, let me quote a contemporary Jewish source talking about this ritual: “Your table is an altar. You are the high priest. That plate of delicious morsels before you, that’s the sacrifice. You do the ritual washing of hands, say a blessing on the food, and then dig in, to elevate all those carbs and proteins into a divine experience.

...This may sound strange, but before washing your hands, be sure that they are clean and free of anything that will obstruct the waters from reaching the entire surface of your hands. This is a spiritual experience, you recall. Beyond Pasteur.

Fill a cup with water and pour twice on your right hand. Repeat on the left.... After washing, lift your hands chest-high and say the following blessing: Blessed are you, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.”² It is a beautiful ritual that makes eating a meal a spiritual experience.

² http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/607403/jewish/Meal-Hand-Washing.htm

There is nothing wrong with it. Quite the contrary, there is everything right with it. Yet Jesus takes that water, for that ritual, and transforms it into wine. It can no longer be used for its old purpose.

That which is...the water... is changed, transformed into something new. In this case, it is the new wine of the kingdom. This first sign points forward to the last sign of the Fourth Gospel, the crucifixion and resurrection...where fully and perfectly new life comes to all people even as the ritual of the Passover is transformed and made available to all people as the Holy Eucharist...where Christ, our Passover is sacrificed for us.

This transforming power of God is what life in Christ is all about. Grace and Holy Trinity Church has recognized this and embraced it as part of the strategic plan. Over and over again in our conversations as we worked on the plan the word “transformation” came up. We affirm in the spiritual journey the desire we all have for personal transformation. We seek ways in the wider world, not just to heal the wounds of poverty but to change the game itself, to get at the very causes of poverty.³

And let’s be honest and clear. transformation is on-going work. It is not a one off. I mean for instance, last year many people made a financial commitment to the church. And that commitment becomes real when, week by week, we actually give. And not only that, the commitment we made may not be all that we can do. When and if our capacity increases or when we see further aspects to God’s call to us or perhaps when we have a surer sense of God’s grace and generosity... we have the opportunity to make new efforts. Our water gets changed into wine...over and over and over.

Paul Tillich, that amazingly brilliant 20th century theologian talks about this in terms of grace. In a famous sermon, from his book “Shaking the Foundations” he said: “Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? ...We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. ...

it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.

³ More on the Strategic Plan is available at this address. <http://ghtc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Strategic-Plan-12.8.15.pdf>

It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual...

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you'...In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement."⁴ In that moment, once again, we are transformed.

Sometimes we go to the wedding and when we go to the water jars to perform the ritual washing, we discover instead, the new wine of the kingdom. We discover the acceptance and love of the Jesus Movement and we are changed, transformed, once again. No vote takes that away from us. God's grace rules over all. Amen.

⁴ <http://hoppinghadrianswall.com/2011/07/07/you-are-accepted/>