

## “God works in surprising ways – water into wine”

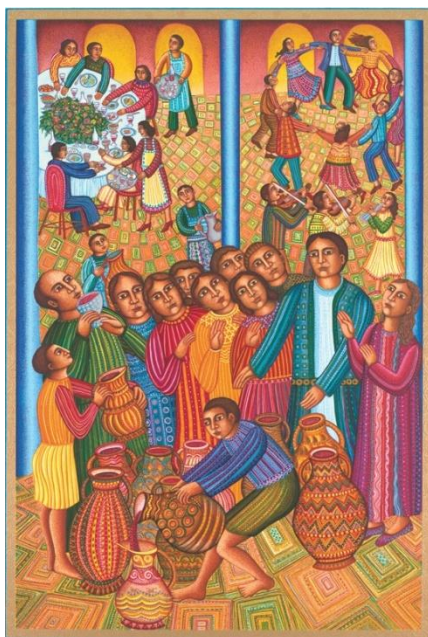
John 2:1-11; 1 Cor. 12:1-11 (January 16, 2022) – Pastor Paul Matheson

This morning I want to begin a series of sermons that will continue from now, through the end of February - until the beginning of Lent. Each Sunday I'll be using readings from the Lectionary.

And it seems to me there is a common *theme* to these readings, which is this: God works in surprising ways!

So that will be our focus. The surprising work of God.

In this season of Epiphany we should expect God to open our eyes to something new. Some revelation or unveiling of God's activity in our midst.



Swanson, John August. Wedding Feast, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58581> [retrieved January 15, 2022]. Original source: www.JohnAugustSwanson.com - copyright 1996 by John August Swanson.

In today's passage, Jesus attends a wedding banquet. Those are rare things in these Covid times: banquets, celebrations and gatherings of people. We miss them, don't we?

Celebrations bring us together. They enhance our feeling of well-being and connection. So much so that, in the Bible, banquets are a symbol for the kingdom of God.

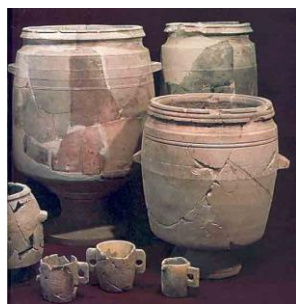
And here's Jesus, ready to do his first miracle – where? At a banquet! A wedding celebration. Jesus, and his disciples, and his mother Mary, all find themselves invited to the party.

And maybe we need to pause right there and say that's the *first* surprise - at least for me. You see, I grew up in a home where partying was not something we did very much of.

The temperance movement exerted a powerful influence. My parents never drank.

Which is no bad thing. Lord knows the misuse of alcohol has caused a world of misery to many families and ruined individual lives.

But Jesus was not a tea-totaller. Here he is at a wedding. And the party runs out of wine. So Mary gives a nod to her son.



He seems reluctant to do anything at first. “What concern is that to you and me?” But she tells the servants to follow his instructions.

And before you know it he has those servants filling six stone jars to the brim. These jars were used for ritual washings, rites of purification.

But now Jesus turns them to another purpose. The water they held, turned to wine, will be more than enough to satisfy the guests.

And when I say more, I mean *far* more: 6 X 30 gallons of wine. Well, you do the math. This is like Niagara Falls.

It's an abundance of wine – far more than what they will ever need. A sign of God's extravagant grace in the midst of our human scarcity.

It's a miracle!

And for *me* it's a reminder that Jesus is no tight-lipped, scowling prude. The religion he brings has far more to do with fostering human relationship, and bringing joy, and renewal, and abundant life ... yes, far *more* than it has to do with rule-keeping, or "be quiet, and sit still in the pew, and don't do this and don't do that."

Which is what I thought as a child.

The surprise for me, as I've grown to know more about this God revealed in Jesus, is that God is no kill-joy. God loves laughter, and music and dancing and people enjoying each another. And generosity.

So ... that's surprise number one. It may just be *my* surprise. But don't worry, there are plenty more.

So you see we've come to the main event. The thing that occupies centre-stage. And that is the miraculous *transformation*. Water into wine!

It's amazing, isn't it? I mean it doesn't naturally happen. It's something outside our human abilities.

If you could turn water into wine, if you could turn iron into gold, if you could turn coal into diamonds ...

Oh wait, that *does* actually happen. But it takes millions of years and tremendous geological forces.

We think you can't take something that is one thing and make it into another.

Yet that is exactly what Jesus does on a regular basis. Takes something *ordinary*, something we think doesn't matter, and makes it *extraordinary*, something of enormous value and worth.

Jesus takes what we do, our small acts of service, ordinary words of kindness, expressions of human love, and *transforms* them into beautiful kingdom things.

I think this is what the apostle Paul means when he describes the Spirit's work in our lives. He says there are varieties of *gifts*, varieties of *services*, varieties of *activities*.

Notice that these terms are interchangeable. And that God uses all these things for our common good.

Here, in the church, the body of Christ, God works through *many* kinds of people. With many kinds of gifts: Quilters, greeters, visitors, administrators, preachers, musicians, encouragers, prayers, leaders and servers ... Whoever you are, whatever you do, when you do it for the glory of God it becomes a movement of the Spirit, a way of God working in the world.

I remember a person who was part of a congregation I served. She loved to bake. And she loved the church - the way she'd been welcomed and accepted into its fellowship.

So as a way of expressing her appreciation, one Sunday she did a remarkable thing: She made pie for the whole congregation. After the service we all stayed to enjoy her delicious homemade offering.

It was like the wedding at Cana! We had an *abundance* of pie. More than enough for everyone. It was a gift from one person, offered in love. And the whole community was richer for it.

So, to sum up the *second* surprise: God takes the water of our lives, the ordinary things that we are made of, the often *unremarkable* things that describe the people we are, and makes us sparkle, effervescent! Like a bottle of fine French Champagne.

Sometimes God *even* takes the fallen and disreputable parts of ourselves, things we may be ashamed of, and parts we don't want anyone else to see or know about, and turns them to good. Uses who we are, and what we've done, in order to help others. Makes us part of God's healing work in the world. And that is a miracle as profound as you can find!

But there is yet *another* surprise. *One more thing* I want to point out this morning.

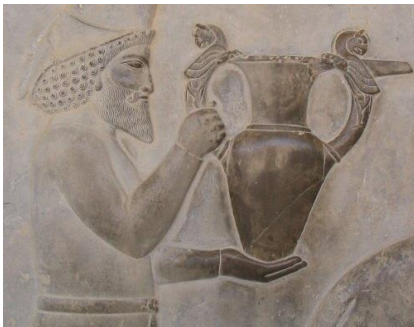
I want you to notice the *timing* of this miracle. When did it occur?

It all happens rather late in the game, doesn't it?

First century wedding celebrations could last for days. People would travel from surrounding villages, families would gather and need a place to stay. So one day would flow into the next, and the next.

We have no idea how long this particular party had continued. But it was long enough for the original stock of wine to run dry.

Can you imagine it dark, late at night? Can you see some of the guests getting a bit unruly?



That's when Jesus tells the servants to draw some wine and take it to the chief steward. Take it to the guy who's supposed to be running this show, and let him have a taste.

And this, for me, is where we find the *greatest* surprise of all!

The steward is amazed. "Most people," he says, "serve the good wine first. And then, when nobody cares anymore, they set out the bottles of plonk.

"But that's not what you've done!"

He gives it another taste just to be sure. "This is really good stuff!" he proclaims, with a grin on his face, wiping his chin. "In fact, it's some of the best I've ever tasted."

"And the amazing thing is you've kept it till last!"

Of course, this flies in the face of everyone's expectation. Including my own. But I find great *encouragement* in it. And maybe you will too!

In the great unfolding work of God, sometimes good things come after a long period of waiting. We may labour for years and never see much happening. We can be faithful but receive no immediate reward.

Yet this passage gives us hope for the *long* term. God isn't finished God's work! God's kingdom appears at surprising times. And *this* particular passage points to the *end* of the day.



I wonder how many of you are reaching the end of *your* day? I don't mean just age-wise, though that's surely a consideration. How many of you have been working for the Lord, but can't see what's been accomplished?

You've worked for justice, but the world is still a cruel and unfair place. You've strived for peace, tried to build bridges of understanding. But then some bully comes along and tears it all apart.

You've raised your children. You've served your church. You've offered your gifts to God in ways that may be large or small. But have they made any *difference*?

Well, we don't always know that, do we?

Soren Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood *backwards*; but it must be lived forwards."

In other words, it's not until you've reached the end, and I mean the very end, that you can know what God knows. Only then can you see the whole picture, with all the stops and starts and ups and downs. Only then will we know what our little piece of the whole picture has been.

In the middle, we don't know much at all. But we trust that being faithful matters. And doing the best we can is important. And we believe that life is *not* meaningless and that our work is not in vain. Because God is in it.

And God's being in it and through it and above it and beneath it and beyond it gives us hope.

I need to tell you something up front. I thought I was retired. I thought my work as a Pastor had come to an end. And I was quite alright with that.

I told the Search Committee as much. And one of them said, "Yeah, I thought I'd retired too. But then a church asked me to come and work with them. So I had several more years of service."

There went that excuse!

So here I am, and here we are. And maybe we think it's late in the game and nothing much will happen. But we don't know that, do we?

Because our God works in surprising ways. And we never see the full picture until we reach the end of the journey, and it is finished.

<sup>17</sup> I do know this: God's goodness and grace overflows with abundance. The new wine of the Kingdom is the best we'll ever taste. And it will never run dry!

So, as we begin our time together, may God be with us. May the gifts that each one of us brings be full of God's Holy Spirit and the life of God's new creation.

May God take our ordinary, run-of-the-mill human lives, and transform them, and the time we have together, into something beautiful.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.