

“The Miracle of Being Used”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany – 16 & 17 January 2016  
I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Many years ago, when Stephanie and I worked with young adults in their 20s and 30s down in Atlanta, we lived in this giant house owned by the Church, and one of the things we enjoyed most was also one of things that caused us the greatest anxiety: hosting parties. We held a Kentucky Derby party in May, in an effort to bring some culture to the city, and a low-country boil in the winter and a pig roast – a whole pig roasted over a pit all night long – in the fall.

What made these parties especially challenging was the sheer scale of them. You see, the Cathedral was a huge congregation of over 6,000 members located right in the middle of an enormous city of more than 4 million inhabitants, a city teeming with people in their 20s and 30s. After about year of starting the group, we had about 70 young adults in our core, and we always encouraged them to invite friends, which they often did, though sometimes they’d forget to tell us. So preparing for one of those parties worried us to death.

We never really knew how much food to fix or how many beverages to buy, and the idea of running out of something always bothered me. There were nights when we cut it pretty close, which helps me empathize with the hosts of the wedding in Cana of Galilee, who had run out of wine.

You see, hospitality was incredibly important to people in a place like Cana 2,000 years ago, and a wedding was the greatest event any family could host. These celebrations usually lasted for days and unlike us, who can rush down the local grocery and restock if supplies start to run low, exhausting the wine supply presented an insurmountable challenge back then. Running

out of wine would have been considered an embarrassing and enduring stain on the household's honor. Good thing Jesus was on the guest list.

An intriguing thing about this miracle is that Jesus, instead of taking initiative, required prompting from his mother, Mary. At first, Jesus flatly refused her, but Mary took charge and ordered the servants to "Do whatever he tells you." Jesus told the servants to fill six large earthenware jars with water. Each held between 20 and 30 gallons. That's the equivalent of 600 – 900 bottles of wine, which may be why this is the most popular miracle among Episcopalians. Then Jesus instructed them to scoop out a sample for the chief steward to taste, and he was impressed and surprised, asking why the best wine had been saved for last. Any good host knows that you start out with the best vintage.

Thanks to Jesus, everyone thirst was quenched, the joy kept flowing, and the host family's honor was preserved. Yet Jesus remained largely anonymous. The servants knew what had happened, but the steward and apparently everyone else had no clue what Jesus had done. In every other miracle performed by Jesus – healings and demonic exorcisms and the stilling of the storms – the people involved knew who did what, but not in Cana, the first miracle of Jesus' ministry in John's gospel and the only place in scripture where it is preserved.

The changing of water into wine is the quintessential expression of God's abundance, not only in quantity but also in quality, and like all other miracles, it conveys a message about God's power to alter reality. We yearn for that miraculous power to be revealed more often. We live in a world that seems mostly bereft of bona fide miracles, and hardly a week goes by when I don't covet miraculous power to heal sick bodies and broken hearts. Perhaps some of you experience similar feelings. But the good news is that we, or rather God working through us, can alter reality and make our lives and our world better.

That's the message Paul provides. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." He then lists a host of remarkable gifts – wisdom, knowledge, faith, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, interpretation of tongues. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but an indicative one. There are more spiritual gifts than could possibly be numbered, and all who follow Jesus have access to one or more of these gifts. "To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Like Jesus at Cana, many people exercise their gifts anonymously. In fact, the manifestation of these gifts is often anonymous to those who exercise them. Many people aren't even aware that spiritual gifts are active in their lives, maybe because we take them for granted. But the presence and impact of those gifts are undeniable.

How many times has the gift of wisdom or knowledge led us to good decisions or helped us solve hard problems in our lives and in our parish? How many times have we exercised the gift of discernment to find our way or to help other people choose the right course in life and ministry? How many times have we translated the Gospel with integrity so that it can be intelligible to people living in the modern world? To answer all of these questions with what Stephanie likes to call a "Kentuckyianism," a blue ton. We use those gifts a blue ton at St. Luke's and well beyond.

Yet it was not us who used those gifts. Rather it was God using us, working through us as agents of His purpose, pouring into us the spirit of wisdom and knowledge and discernment and interpretation, so that the love and abundance of God might show forth.

Now I know that none of us likes the idea of being used, but when we're used by God, it's OK, because that is why we exist: to be open and ready and eager and grateful to serve and be used as vessels for God's merciful grace. This idea of being used by God keeps us from

claiming these gifts as our own product, our own possession. The idea of being used keeps us focused on the sole source of these spiritual gifts, and on how we act as stewards of the amazing grace God provides, stewards who sample the wine and then share it with everyone else.

Now I know there are some people here thinking, “I have not been given a spiritual gift for the common good,” and you might be right. You might be resisting the idea that God can use you, maybe because you’re too proud or maybe because you feel average and ordinary, but Jesus the wedding guest lives inside you. You can be the agent of God’s grace. All you need do is ask for the gift and be ready to take a risk. Even the courage and strength to receive the gift and exercise it will be provided by God.

However, some of you are thinking, “I have not been given a spiritual gift for the common good,” and you would be wrong, because you do exercise spiritual gifts. I’ve seen it. You’re simply not aware of how God’s using you. You’re working God’s purposes out in a sort of personal anonymity, oblivious to how God works through you, even though other people can see clearly how you bless people, sometimes just by being who you are. Keep on doing what you’re doing and being who you are, and hope that someday you will see what others see in you.

Yet the most common reason why we frequently fail to see how God’s spiritual gifts flow through us is that we think our efforts paltry and meaningless. We disregard spiritual gifts because they don’t move mountains or bring world peace. All I do is wash the linens used at the altar, but the cleanliness of those linens symbolizes how Jesus cleanses our souls and makes them pure and worthy and holy in God’s sight. All I do is greet people at the door, but that basic act of warm hospitality can make a person feel at home and become part of a supportive Church family where they can be inspired and empowered to serve as vessels for God’s gifts.

None of these things are what we could call bona fide miracles, but the real miracle is you, offering up yourself to God in the company of others for the common good, so that together we can be the miracle God wants to bestow upon the world. The miracle is God's desire to work through us, gradually fulfilling God's vision for how the world is meant to be. Buying drinks and cooking food for a party is not miraculous, but it's a necessary part of a much greater whole.

Look around you. It's not one stone that made St. Luke's so strong and beautiful. It took many stones, and what really makes St. Luke's strong and beautiful are the people. And at the risk of sounding irreverent, changing a bunch of water into wine, while very impressive, is not a world-changing event either. Rather it serves as a hint of what will come, when later in John's gospel, Jesus will describe himself as the fount of living water that sates thirst forever. And just as Jesus changed the water into wine, the waters of baptism that launched us on our spiritual journey find their completeness in the wine of Communion, which symbolizes the blood that was shed to wash away sins and fortify us for the work of being used to build up God's kingdom.

Seek out the gift of spiritual power from God. You will not need to look hard, because God is waiting to flood you with grace. Accept the gift you're given, humbly and gratefully. It may not be the gift you want or feel you need, but it's the spiritual gift God has chosen for you to share, so get on with it! Allow the spiritual blessing of God's gift to flow through you a world desperately thirsty for the abundant goodness only God can provide. And be not anxious, because God never runs out; God never runs out, so neither will you. Amen.