

20 January 2019
Second Sunday of Epiphany
St John 2: 1 - 11

Nineteen years ago next month I was in Israel, and one of the places we toured as Cana, stopping by a church that was built directly over the very house, at least according to tradition, where our Gospel lesson took place; where Jesus turned the water into wine. There really wasn't much to see, so it was a very short stop - with our exit through the gift shop, of course. There, in addition to the olive wood nativity sets and other items, we were offered a taste of wine from the region, and urged to buy bottles to take home to use at Holy Communion in our churches. I took a whiff of it, and when I realized it reminded me of the Kalamazoo River in muggy weather, I turned down the offer. Compared to almost everything else we saw, this was just not impressive.

That might be said of this first miracle in St John's Gospel, certainly when we compare it to next Sunday's passage. Nothing about it seems quite right. For one thing, we can't quite understand why Mary is taking it upon herself to get so involved when the host has run out of wine. And when she couldn't fix the problem, she told her son, Jesus, to do something. Jesus comes across rather badly, sounding petulant when he asked what does this have to do with me? My time has not yet come. Yet, he backs down, and we know that he commanded the servants to fill the jugs with some 180 gallons of water, and then miraculously converted it into very good wine. The steward who tasted it, complimented the host for saving the best for last.

This has led a few Bible scholars to try to fix and explain everything, making it all nice, neat, and tidy. More importantly, they have wanted to make Jesus look a lot better.

It is a wonderful story, and we can go straight to the miraculous divine power of Jesus, but even that leaves us wondering if there is something more that we are missing. We have looked at the abundance of God, using the example of upwards of 180 gallons of good wine for the last part of the wedding reception. And from there, how God's abundance is still easily found today - if we look at it.

I think there is more. The first is the location or setting - Cana itself. It is sometimes described as a city in Galilee, but it was in the northern region, some distance from the Sea of Galilee. It was about 100 miles from the Temple in Jerusalem, and on the border of lands controlled by non-Jews or Gentiles. More than anything else, it was what is best described as an open city that was a meeting point for the trade caravans from the east and southwest. It was a rough city, filled not only with traders eager to

make a profit, but an assortment of lawless people eager to take advantage of them. It was within the borders of Israel, but so secular that Judaism didn't really have much of an impact there.

The location is important because it makes a very clear statement that divine power of Jesus was not limited by geography or just to His own people. His power is trans-national, going well beyond borders and races or nations. Jesus moves out of the relative comfort zone of a predominantly Jewish region into a very secular and often lawless territory.

In a way, our world which has become increasingly polarized and divided over national borders, races, languages and even accents, politics, and everything else imaginable, Christians around the world are unified by our belief in Him and our affirmation of faith that He is the son of God. And when we reflect further about the setting, our Lord's power and domain extend well beyond religious divisions. All people are God's beloved children, and that has some very important implications for all of us.

On a personal level, it moves us from the temptation of thinking, "Well, I've got Jesus - even if those others don't. I've got MY salvation, and that's what matters."

There is something else, far more personal, that I believe is the take-home lesson for us today. For a moment, create your vision of this wedding. The guests are in part of the house, but behind the scenes the servants are scrambling to keep the food and wine flowing for the next few days. Fuel has to be put in the ovens, platters have to be cleaned and then put back into circulation again. Empty wine cups collected, washed, and refilled.

In the midst of all of this work, someone realized the wine was running low, and tells the steward in charge of the hospitality. It's a crisis because in the ancient Jewish tradition, when the wine was finished, it meant the party was over, and it was time for the guests to leave. It was far too early for that to happen, and if the guests did start leaving, it would bring dishonour to the families.

There was a buzz of frantic whispered conversations and increasing anxiety, all kept away from the guests who were not meant to know anything was amiss. But somehow Mary found out about it, and Mary went to Jesus who, as we know was not very helpful at first. Then He changed His mind, perhaps realizing the disaster and disgrace the hosts would feel. He had compassion on their plight.

Very quietly, without fanfare, He went to work, and we know the result. The wedding reception was memorably magnificent.

This was a very private miracle. No one watched it, outside of perhaps Mary and maybe John. And perhaps they didn't see what the Lord did, but learned of it later. And maybe they didn't learn the details until much later.

There is the example for us. As Jesus would later teach - give your alms in private, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. Keep it private and don't boast about it. God knows the good you are doing, and that is the one and only thing that matters.

One of my favourite novels was R F Delderfield's book, "To Serve them All My Days." One of the characters was a crusty old teacher at the boy's school. Howarth was a true curmudgeon, and for the most part, friendless among the staff and students. He died, and at a school reunion the next year, one former student after another stood up to tell the others what he had done on their behalf. My father died, and he paid most of my tuition. He paid for my books. He wrote letters and stayed in touch. Some of my classmates were killed in the Great War; he wrote letters to their parents.

No one knew these unexpected, not on the job description things he did. He did it because they were the right thing to do. No one recognized the heart of a servant that was so full of compassion.

I have reread that long passage so many times that the book seems to fall open to it, just as our Prayer Books seem to open to rite I or Rite II. And it is a constant reminder that true Christianity, practical practicing Christianity, was never meant to be a marketing tool either for individuals or for a church. When it comes to caring for people, sometimes we have to throw out policies and procedures manuals and paperwork, and just get on with it.