

**“New Wine in Old Barrels”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**January 17, 2010**  
**Scripture: John 2:1-11**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Loving God, as we hear your Word during this time of worship, let it become so deeply embedded within us that it will ever be present as your strengthening grace in our lives, that no matter what crisis may come. Through Christ we pray. Amen.*

One of the most interesting – but also disturbing – things I hear on a daily basis is the remark, “Oh I am not religious, but I am spiritual”. Have you heard that, too? While the comment concerns me, at times I really do understand what people are saying.

You see, the whole structure of how institutional religions are supposed to work is based on a reliance on things past. “What would Moses do?” “How did the early Christians do it?” “Where do the ancient texts instruct us?” Let’s face it, except for those end-of-time-fixated types, our faith foundations are almost exclusively concerned with *how things were* rather than how things are or will be or should be.

During my seminary training, one of the things I learned was that trying to convince people that their understanding of the Biblical texts may be different from the views they have heard before is a difficult task. In fact, we were alerted to the likelihood that the introduction of change in any way, shape or form in the life of the church would be met with criticism and negative comments.

Friends, I think Jesus’ first miraculous act in the fourth Gospel confronts this reality. Jesus’ key miracles are consistently called “signs” in the Gospel of John. They may certainly reveal something about Jesus, but they are not intended to call attention to Jesus, but to God, his source of power. “Signs” may or may not be attractive and interesting to look at, but they are not in any case ends in themselves; signs point to something beyond themselves.

Following the first chapter in John’s gospel when he tells us about the beginning of time and

Jesus’ involvement in it, and then the brief consideration of John the Baptist’s ministry, Jesus begins the task of gathering his *official followers*. And then, as John tells us, “on the third day” – and don’t think that is an unimportant designation – Jesus is seen doing what he probably did regularly. He attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It is quite likely that he attended this wedding as a relative to either the bride or the groom. It could be that the bride was one of his sisters. I see this as a possibility since the servants in the story are given instructions by Jesus’ mother.

There is this odd exchange between Jesus and his mother leading up to the sign. Mary tells Jesus that the wine is gone. “They” have no wine, she says; “they” meaning those who are supposed to be serving the wine. Jesus protests having this called to his attention. “How is this my business?” he asks. Then, Mary, in a motherly way, says, “yeah, yeah,” and turning to the servants she says, “Do whatever he tells you; he’ll come around in a minute.”

It may seem like a frivolous use of Jesus’ power – I mean, really water to wine. And it has been the subject of a host of low-brow humor – like the Baptist preacher who was caught with a load of moonshine whiskey. He claimed he was just hauling water. When confronted with the fact that it was whisky rather than water, he exclaimed, “It’s a miracle. Our blessed Lord has done it again!”

As we think about the story John tells us, there is some background information you need to understand. It was always necessary that a host – whether for a wedding or any other gathering at his home – would keep big water jars or barrels at the ready so that he or any of his guests could clean up after a dusty journey. This was especially before any spiritual act such as prayer, which required a person to be ritually pure. This is where the symbolism of the story begins.

On the day of the wedding there were six of these huge vats (each holding 20 to 30 gallons of water). Here is another piece of information you might find helpful. Six was the number representing incompleteness in numerology. The number seven represented “perfection”, so the number six was understood to fall short of perfection. So what we are to understand from this story, I think, is that old Judaism was incomplete – as represented by the six

barrels. It wasn’t corrupt or useless or evil, but it was incomplete and wasn’t working any longer.

So the dirty barrels are rinsed out (at least we hope they are), and they are filled to the brim with fresh water, and before anyone can wash his or her hands or feet or face in any of them, the water becomes wine. Of course, those who are serving make certain that no one knows from where their wine is being drawn! And then – surprise; surprise: the wine drawn from the barrels was better than the first wine served which was, by tradition, the best wine served.

The only people who knew about the “water to wine” sign were the servants and the followers Jesus had enlisted. This event caused them to believe in Jesus. While the word “believe” is the translation in most of the Bibles we have today, the actual translation is “faith”. But since we don’t have a “verb” which means faith, believe is what we get. These followers of Jesus “faithed” in him because of this secret sign. This was not a faith which displaced *ultimate* faith which can be in God alone, but rather an indication of their confidence in what Jesus was about so far.

This powerful story in John’s gospel can teach us many lessons. For one, the necessity of reinterpreting and reframing foundational facts of faith is an ongoing responsibility and requirement; it simply isn’t optional. The ways – the traditions – the ways in which we do the business of the church need to be rethought on a continual basis. The ways in which we “do church” – whether we are talking about worship, outreach or mission – need to be re-envisioned. Whether we like or not – and we rarely do – the old ways run dry; they just flat out don’t work for us any more. They don’t need to be renounced, for sure, but they do need to be freshened or tweaked.

Perhaps, though, the most important lesson in today’s Gospel story is that reconstituted faith perspectives can come from the most unusual and unexpected sources. Jesus didn’t make new wine in new barrels. Rather, he used the ritual jars (the old ways) into which to pour the new wine. Indeed, we can build on the past, but we can’t live or “faith” by the old ways.

Finally, our faith is refocused every time we take Jesus’ lead in pointing us to God. This new wine

story wasn't a once-for-all call to leave the old law behind and embrace Jesus' new perspectives on it. The story was a call for consistently drinking the wine of renewed faith perspectives which make possible being God's person right here and right now.

As most of you are aware, First Church is in the process of finding ways to grow the church – not just in numbers, though that is important – but also in discipleship, community involvement and mission orientation. You will likely remember that we – First Church – that means you – are in the process of finding ways to invite and involve people in the life and ministry of the church. And you will remember, too, that our Session empowered and the congregation commissioned a task force charged with finding ways to meet those goals.

That task force, friends, has worked long and hard over these last few months. They – maybe I should say we, because I have been involved every step of the way – created a new mission statement, designed a new logo, and created some goals for each and every one of the current standing committees of Session. Change is never easy – in fact, change is sometimes hard. But, sometimes change is necessary. And it seems to me that Session – the people you have chosen to lead and guide First Church – realize that if we are to grow, some things need to be changed. And while change isn't easy, it is change which brings growth.

Let me ask you: Why do you think the disciples put their faith in Jesus? Was it simply the miracle? Remember they have only been with him for a few days at this point. They have seen no proof that he is anything besides a teacher. Is it simply the miracle which wins their devotion? If you ask me, there is something else at work here.

Think of the history of Israel. They had been around as a tribe and a nation for close to 2000 years. Think of all the things they had experienced: The beginnings in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt; Moses and the Exodus; the wandering in the wilderness and the giving of the law...on an on until Jesus steps into their world. In a word – the nation's wine has run out. The disciples along with the rest of the nation have lost hope. What are you going to do when the wine runs out?

The disciples put their faith in Jesus not

solely because of a miracle, turning water into wine, but because the nation of Israel, the people of God were ready. The Nation's wine was gone. The disciples saw in Jesus new wine, a new way, a new teaching. "Who knows?" they thought. Perhaps he could even be the Messiah." Jesus changed water into wine, but soon he was to transform their ordinary lives into a new and exciting period of hope and exhilaration.

No – friends – change is never easy. But sometimes it is necessary that we be willing to accept and celebrate new wine in old barrels.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to: David Albert Farmer for his sermon, "New Wine in Old Wash Basins", King Duncan for his sermon, "The Wedding was Saved, but the Marriage?", and Brett Blair and Staff for the sermon, "Saving the Best 'til Last".*

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