

SERMON TITLE: "Living Water: Transforming Water"
SERMON TEXT: John 2:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 25, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many of you have asked me how my vacation was. My husband Steve and I went to Oregon to visit his 95.5 year old mother, his two brothers and their wives, and the Oregon coast. As planned, we spent quality time with the family, relaxed, and feasted our eyes on lots of natural beauty.

One afternoon, when we didn't have much to do, we took our books to a city park. It was our intent to spend some time reading. But because the lawn-mowing crew was out and because of where the available shade was, we ended up sitting near the children's playground and watching what was happening there.

Besides the usual climbing bars, slides, and swings, this children's playground had a neat water feature. When the kids would put their hand in front of the motion sensor, a bunch of fountains would begin to spout water. As we watched for a while, we could see that the water had a couple different patterns—first squirting in these ways and then squirting in those. One part of the water fountain squirted water into some hanging buckets. When the buckets got full, they tipped over—dumping the whole buckets on any kids that happened to be underneath at that moment. Steve and I enjoyed watching the children frolic and squeal with life. However much it cost the city to install and maintain that water park, it definitely was transforming a hot summer day into a cool afternoon of fun.

In this hot, dry summer here in Utah, I thought it might be refreshing for us to spend some weeks focusing our attention on water. So, for seven Sundays, we're going to dive into the water stories that are so abundant in the Gospel according to John. Today, we begin with the living water story in John, chapter two. Let's join Jesus and friends at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and experience the joy and life in this miracle story of transforming water.

1—OBVIOUSLY, IT'S ABOUT WINE

Let's begin with the obvious. This story of transforming water is a story about wine, and not just any wine. This was wine that tasted good. Maybe that's no issue to you at all. But in the tee-totaling church of my youth, Sunday School teachers and preachers went to great lengths to try and persuade us that the "wine" in the Bible wasn't really wine at all. "It was unfermented grape juice," they would say. Once I got beyond my gullible years, I didn't believe that anymore. Of course it was fermented grape juice! Fermentation is what naturally happens to grape juice that is kept for any length of time without the benefits of refrigeration. When Jesus spoke elsewhere about not putting new wine into old, stiff wineskins, he was making a clear reference to the expansion that occurs during fermentation. New wineskins were needed because they would be flexible enough to manage the changing size of the juice as it was transforming into wine.

Some denominations have no qualms about alcohol. Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans have always used wine in their communion rituals. We United Methodists have a more-nuanced view. Like the denomination of my youth, Methodists have a history of temperance. The avoidance of alcohol was ritualized for us in the late 1800s, when a Methodist named Thomas Welch invented pasteurized grape juice which could be kept in storage and easily used for communion services. Even though temperance slowed down after Prohibition ended, we United Methodists still use grape juice in our communion rituals because we are mindful of those who struggle with alcoholism. We don't want to add anything to their burdens.

All that said, however, we United Methodists recognize that references to wine in the Bible are most often a sign of the abundant life that comes from God. Yes, there are verses and stories that give helpful warnings against drunkenness and imbibing too much of a good thing. But, generally, throughout the Bible, wine is understood as one of the blessed provisions of God. Thus, in this story of Jesus

transforming water at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, wine was a normal, important, and obvious ingredient in a faith-filled celebration of life.

2—GOD CARES ABOUT OUR NEEDS

Another flavor we can detect in this story of transforming water into wine is that God cares about our needs. Not only did the wedding hosts and guests need more wine, but it seems that Jesus needed a little encouragement to get going with this first miracle of his ministry. Since this event is early in the Gospel of John, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it's understandable that Jesus was reluctant to jump into this water-transforming responsibility. But his mother had confidence in his abilities. And she, in this story, is the one who first bears the insight of God. Mary is the one who notices the need of the wedding hosts and guests. She is the one who cares deeply about their potential embarrassment and disappointment. And so, just as she gave birth to Jesus and guided him to become the man of God that he was, Mary nudged Jesus to step up in this situation. Or you could say that she twisted his arm or gave him a kick in the seat of his pants. With her Jewish motherly ways, she encouraged Jesus to feel the pain of their hosts, care about their need, and help solve their problem.

As Jesus followed through on this task, God's glory was revealed in him. It wasn't only the water that was transformed into wine, but Jesus' own attitude was also transformed. Early in this story, Jesus didn't think his hour had yet come. Was he putting off his calling because he was afraid or shy or lacked confidence? Did he think he had other more important things to do while he was at this wedding celebration? Jesus' response, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" seems rather aloof. Maybe he was defensive because he didn't think he was ready yet to take on other people's problems. But, with his mother's urging, Jesus accepted the challenge and saved the party. Because his mother gave him the push that he needed, Jesus grew in both his abilities and sensibilities. As Jesus himself was transformed, he revealed his glory by demonstrating that God cares about all our human needs.

3—LIVING WATER IS TRANSFORMING

Every time I travel on a vacation, I really enjoy looking at the rock formations and thinking about how water has eroded the banks. Water carves down mountains and changes flatlands into valleys. Any time a waterway becomes blocked up or dried up so that it can't flow, it becomes stagnant, and the life in that stream dies. But, when the stream is moving freely it transforms the earth and the life around it.

In John 2:6 we read that the water was transformed into wine in six stone jars that were used for holding water for the Jewish rites of purification. The information about "20 or 30 gallons each" was given to impress us with the quantity of wine that Jesus made. But the part about Jewish purification is explained for another reason. It's kind of like if you had a lovely church parlor with light-colored carpet and someone let the kids in there to paint their Vacation Bible School crafts. The raucous joy of the children spilling paint on the floor would be quite a contrast to the purity of the fine décor. For some, that change would be unwelcome. But the lively transformation of the space might well reveal the glory of Christ.

For the eight years I've been the pastor here at First UMC, I've continually been impressed that this congregation isn't territorial about room spaces and furniture, like some churches are. Here at Ogden First UMC, you don't get upset if we move the pulpit or the altar or the piano around sometimes. Nobody complained that we moved some of the small pews to create the Kids Corner in the narthex a few weeks ago. Your flexibility in these things is a very healthy trait for ministry. I congratulate you on that! But, still, I wonder. Do we have any sacred cows that need to spill their milk? Is there anything about our church that we've been holding onto too tightly? We may think it is holy and pure, but maybe God wants to transform it into something else?

Or, if not the church as a whole, what about you personally? Do you have some righteous ideas or practices that might need to give way to allow God to meet the needs of people around you? I'm not saying that you should abandon your Bible reading and prayer time. Nor am I saying that you should quit attending worship. I'm just wondering if any of us might have some rigid notions about how we are

somehow superior or favored by God because of what we do or don't do, who we are, or how we were born into this world. I'm wondering if any of those ways we live and move in the world have the air of righteousness about them that might not really be serving the needs of others. Maybe we're trying to keep our purity by not getting involved in the real and needy concerns of other people.

This story makes me wonder if God might want to erode some of our set-in-stone-jar practices and attitudes to allow for more spontaneity in joyful celebration with other people who might not be as tidy or all-together as we are. Do you suppose that maybe, possibly, God might want to transform us in such a way that we let down our own guard so we can engage with those who are worried and lacking what they need? If we allow it, this miraculously living water has the power to change us and help us transform others.

CONCLUSION

During our road trip from Utah to the Oregon coast, Steve and I drove past miles and miles of drought-stricken fields and burned up forests. Fortunately, western Oregon has received more rain, and the McKenzie, Willamette, Umpqua, and Coquille Rivers still carry water to the Pacific Ocean. There we saw more signs of life-giving and transforming water as irrigated fields, orchards, and vineyards formed green dots on the thirsty countryside.

While we couldn't actually see it happening as we drove by, we know that, in those vineyards, water was rising up through the brown vine trunks and coursing out to the green leaves and tendrils of each grapevine. Water was quenching the thirst of those plants so they could produce grapes, which will eventually be crushed, juiced, fermented, and turned into wine. My husband brought back a couple bottles from his home area of the Umpqua River valley—just in case any proof of such a miraculous transformation might be needed.

Even in a year of extreme drought, we can proclaim that God is good to us. God gives us life through transforming water.