

Hespeler, 20 January, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

There were six stone water jars, I mean really large water jars that each held twenty or thirty gallons. And they were just sitting there by the entrance when the mother of Jesus brought a crisis to his attention.

They were at a wedding – a wedding that was the most important event that would take place in Cana that year. Life in Cana – life in most any Galilean village – could be pretty bleak. It was nothing but a hardscrabble existence working from dawn to dusk just to survive. By some estimates, about 90% of what they were able to produce was siphoned off in taxes, rents and fees to support the temple and religion of Judea.

Opportunities to celebrate anything were few and far between. So when those opportunities came, they were of vital importance to everybody. A wedding feast in ancient Galilee was as close as many of these people would get to feeling that life was good. So when the wine ran out on only the third day of a wedding party that was supposed to last a week, you can bet that it was a crisis. The morale of the entire region was on the line.

But even more than that was at stake. Jesus had come into the world as the bridegroom. Everywhere he went it was supposed to be a celebration. Once some of the religious people even came up to Jesus and asked him why it was that his disciples didn't fast and didn't go around with miserable faces all the time. Jesus' answer was that it wasn't fitting. If they were at a funeral, sure, that would make sense. But Jesus was among them as the bridegroom and when the bridegroom was present you had to celebrate.

The presence of Jesus in the world was a sign, as it says in our Old Testament reading this morning, that **“as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”** So can you imagine what it would be like for Jesus to show up at a wedding party at the very moment when the entire celebration fell apart because there was no wine? This was serious; the entire ministry of Jesus was at stake.

So, as much as Jesus wanted to protest that his time had not yet arrived, as much as he did protest to his mother that for him to take action was a bit premature, there really was no question: Jesus had to do something about the wine running out. And Jesus had the power to do something; there seems to be no question about that. Why, I suppose that he could have created wine in vessels out of nothing had he chosen to do so. But he did not choose to do so. He chose to respond to the crisis in a very particular way. And there was the problem.



Six Stone Jars

You see there were six stone jars by the entrance – very large jars each holding twenty or thirty gallons. They were there for a very good reason, and that reason did not include the making of wine. They were there for the Jewish rites of purification. And you need to understand what that was and how important it was. You know how your mother always taught you that you should wash your hands before a meal because if you eat with dirty hands you might get sick and make others sick? Well, it didn't have anything to do with that.

They were not there for hygienic purposes but for religious purposes. They were there so that these poor provincial Galilean folks of Cana could live up to the expectations of the Judeans (who figured that they knew what God really wanted from people). They had taught the Galileans to do these water rituals in order to be acceptable to the Judeans and to God.

And Jesus seems to have gone out of his way to use those six stone jars to supply the missing wine to keep the party going. In doing so, however, he compromised them. Wine was a drink that was created with yeast. Yeast was considered to be ritually impure. So those six stone jars were at least temporarily rendered completely useless for their only purpose. They were compromised.

And Jesus did this without asking permission and without even telling anyone what he was doing. When the water was turned to wine and the wine taken to the steward, even he didn't know where it came from – that it came from the six stone jars. Nobody knew.

Oh, wait, that's not quite right, is it? The servants who had drawn the water, it says that they knew. In fact, I'll bet they were sniggering the whole time. What did they care about the rituals of their masters and "betters"? I'll bet that while they passed the wine to the steward, they were thinking to themselves, "This guy doesn't even know that this Jesus just contaminated all of his precious purification jars. Wait'll he finds out!"

So think of what Jesus has just done. He has defiled an essential part of a solemn and important ritual, just to keep a party going. What is more, the Gospel of John tells us that what Jesus did was a sign. There are seven signs that Jesus performs in this gospel and when you look at each one of them you see that they are not merely miracles (though they are all miraculous in their own way). Each one is clearly a way of announcing something important about who Jesus is and what he has come to do. So we are meant to read deep meaning into all of Jesus' actions at this wedding.

This sign means that, because Jesus has come, the party has started and that nothing should get in the way of that spirit of celebration. In particular, we should not let something like the intended use of six stone jars to get in the way.

Of course, the real question we need to ask is how do we apply all of this to the life of the church today. If we are to take seriously this story as a sign

of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, I think that we need to expect that the overwhelming nature of the church should be joy. That doesn't mean that we don't deal with serious matters in the life of the church, it doesn't mean that we don't have to deal with trouble or strife but at the end of the day the keynote of our song should be joy because the church is the bride of Christ and **“as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”**

So the question is what stands in the way of the church truly embracing its destiny in joy? I'll tell you what stands in the way: six stone jars. I suggest to you that there are at least six things – things that we have decided are more important than the church embracing its true nature in joy – that keep us from being all that we are called to be. And like Jesus did at Cana, we may need to take some dramatic action – not to destroy those stone jars (Jesus didn't do that) but to show that we are willing to compromise them for the sake of the greater vision.

The first stone jar that we need to get rid of is the spirit of scarcity. Just like what happened in Cana, sometimes that keynote of joy goes missing in the church when the wine runs out – when we enter into a season of scarcity in the church. Scarcity arises in many ways in the life of the church. It tends to happen when money is short of course, but the power of scarcity to kill our joy is greater than even the actual lack of money available.

Even when, to give a wild example, God has proven God's faithfulness yet again by providing to a congregation a balanced budget with all expenses paid, that congregation can still often be infected by a spirit of scarcity that constrains the work it does for the kingdom of God even as it constrains its joy. The spirit of scarcity is a stone jar that needs to be compromised for the sake of the life of the church. We cannot be ruled by the fear of scarcity. That doesn't mean that we throw away such things as financial prudence and careful planning, but if we let the spirit of scarcity rule over us we will not know the joy that God has for us.

The second stone jar that I think that Jesus would have us compromise is formality. Formality is the habit of strongly holding onto certain forms and traditions in the life of the church. It is not that formality and tradition are completely useless, of course. A formal attitude helps to convey the seriousness and the importance of what we do. Following the rules in how we do things certainly can help us to avoid particularly bad mistakes. But when formality becomes elevated as an ideal in itself, it can become very deadly and it immediately alienates any newcomers that arrive among us and are not familiar with our forms.

The third stone jar is our buildings. Now, again, our church buildings are good things. Many of them are beautiful (case in point) and they certainly can be useful in ministry. But what we see again and again in our Presbyterian churches these days is a tendency to elevate the importance of the building

above everything else. Maintaining the building becomes more important than the mission, more important than the joy that we are called to live out. We allow our buildings to define and constrain what we do. Many congregations have become frozen in time because they cannot adapt without bringing radical change to their building, they cannot embrace some new ministry that God is calling them to because their building holds them back. When the building becomes more important than the joy of being the church, we have a problem – we have a stone jar to compromise.

Let's see, what is jar number four? I'm going to label that jar, "We've never done it that way before." And the one beside it that looks rather like it is, "We tried that once and it didn't work." These stone jars represent anything in the church (and there are often many things in the church) that discourage innovation and creativity. Trying something new, branching out, taking risks is not easy and we are often frightened of it. When you try new things, you are not guaranteed success, but there is so much joy to be found in the attempt and when we quash the people who have that creative spirit we so easily destroy their joy.

Which brings us to the sixth stone jar that needs to be compromised to find our joy in being the church today. I'm going to call that one, "The church that used to be." Oh, how much energy do we spend on trying to create the church that we used to know – a church that can no longer exist in the present world? How much joy do we suck out of the successes and achievements of today because they just don't seem to measure up to what happened in the past? Yes, we loved that church that used to be. Yes, great works were done in Christ name! But when our ideal of the past overshadows everything about our present and future, that stone jar has become far too important.

Those are my six jars anyways. Perhaps you might label some of them differently, but I have no doubt that they have meaning for us today. John says that Jesus did in Cana he did as a sign – a sign that continues to speak down through the ages. If we lack in joy in our churches – if the wine has run out at our wedding feast to any extent – we need to ask what is preventing what should be part of the essential nature of the church. Jesus had to compromise some items that were strongly associated with ritual, religion and tradition in order to bring joy back to the wedding feast; we may need to do the same to restore joy in the church.