

“Jesus’ Mission of Transformation” The Rev. Christine Chakoian
John 2:1-11 First Presbyterian Church
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Introduction to Scripture

We began our year in worship together with the Renewal of our Baptismal vows – a meaningful service for many of us, as we reclaim our central identity and purpose. Then, over the last three weeks we’ve focused on *discerning* that identity and purpose. We began with the premise that each of us has a mission in life – even a number of purposes that change over time. Our particular mission – our calling, if you will – depends on the unique combination of gifts that make us who we are. With football on my mind these days I’ve been thinking how few of us would ever have the combination of physical stamina, mental acumen, and leadership traits that make a truly great coach. Each of us has own peculiar amalgam of personality, relationships, aptitudes, accomplishments, and opportunities out of which our personal mission emerges. Identifying our gifts is a key component in figuring out – young or old – how we’re called to spend ourselves.

But as Christians, there is another step in discerning our purpose. As Christians, we also seek *God’s purposes, God’s agenda* for our lives. Once we are baptized into Christ, St. Paul tells us, “We do not live for ourselves and we do not die for ourselves; if we live, we live for the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord.” To discover how to “live for the Lord,” we begin by looking at Jesus’ own mission and following his example. *Imitatio Christi*, the ancients called it: the imitation of Christ. The mission toward which the Spirit propels Jesus immediately after his baptism instructs us in our own baptismal mission.

We’re in our third week in our series on Jesus’ mission, so allow me to start with a brief review of what we’ve discovered so far. According to the gospel of Luke, the very first mission Jesus engages in after *his* baptism is to proclaim the good news to his home town in Nazareth ... a message of compassion, inclusion, and justice. It is a message Jesus holds fast even when it is unpopular, even when it causes him rejection, even when it takes him to the cross. So also we are called to be messengers of the good news, even – and especially -- when justice and compassion are not welcome words.

Last week we explored the second mission Jesus undertakes after baptism: healing those in distress. He heals a man possessed, cures Simon's mother-in-law's fever, and frees many more who'd been wracked by demons. From that Scripture lesson we learned that healing includes rebuke – not of the person, but rebuke of what is sick or twisted in our life that possesses us. And we learned that healing is often painful, but it's a pain that doesn't cause harm; rather it leads to health. And finally we learned that healing at Jesus' hand is not merely relief *from* suffering but also a freedom *to* serve. We looked at how this healing takes place in our individual lives; and then how this healing has felt to us as a *congregation*: the rebuke we felt over the last five or ten years as so many left, and we faced some mean-spirited, defensive, and troubled habits; the surprise we had that our healing was painful but didn't cause us harm – our egos were not so very fragile after all, and our mission and worship were still intact; and the opportunity we face now that we've truly been healed. The relief, the joy, the freedom we feel is delicious. But for our wholeness to be complete, we need to make the connection between the healing we have received and the service and mission to which we are called. Practically, the manifestation of this spiritual wholeness shows up in a number of ways – including involvement in ministries of compassion, and in financial support of our mission together. I have to tell you that your response has been awe-inspiring. The Deacons are still receiving a number of new commitments through their service-opportunities interest checklist. And the Finance Committee reports that we are well on our way to meeting our budget needs for 2007, thanks to your generosity: around \$75,000 new dollars have been committed in this last week alone. We have completely covered our education, worship, basic mission giving and other ministry expenses; now *every new dollar that comes in* now will go directly to mission. I am overwhelmed and grateful, but in my heart of hearts not surprised: you are so responsive to God's Spirit in this place. And God is doing great things through you.

Which leads us directly into our lesson for today, as we turn to Jesus' third central mission after his baptism. As we did last week, I invite you to follow along in your pew Bible; we will read from John 2:1-11. Listen to the Word of God.

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“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and the disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it had come from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

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Jesus and his friends are at a wedding – in those days, a week-long celebration, not only of two people getting married, but two clans uniting. Kinship meant everything then – community, identity, responsibility, hope. To belong to a family was who one was; to begin a new family was a powerful promise of the future. A wedding was a celebration for the whole community; it was an occasion of deep joy; it was a testament to life.

But something has gone wrong at this particular wedding: the wine has run out. This is more than a little problem. It is a source of shame to the bridegroom and his family – a very public demonstration that he cannot, in fact, provide. If the guests find out, it will be a humiliating debacle, and the joy that everyone was feeling would quickly be replaced by pity; the happiness replaced by sorrow. And at a very basic level, the whole community would be distressed, for what had been full of joy had gone empty and, literally dry.

And I'm struck that many of us know how this feels. There are places in our lives that once had been full of joy, and now stand empty; that once had been sources of pride, and now have grown meaningless or even tinged with shame. It is worse than never having felt joy to begin with; to have felt it in a marriage, or a challenge at work ... to have felt the flush of pride in a civic venture, or a child's success ... and then to have it grow empty, and tired, and stale, or worse, to become even a source of shame. It is devastating. And it feels hopeless. The wine has run out.

I'm intrigued that this passage doesn't address *why* the wine has run out ... nor does the Scripture place any shame at all on the bridegroom. The Scripture only speaks of what could happen when the wine runs out ... what could happen when our emptiness is placed in Jesus' hands. And this is what it tells us.

First, Jesus' mother instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. This may sound obvious, but notice that this is not a self-help enterprise. The first step in this transformation is not to do an assessment, not to call a meeting, not to cough up money, not to bring in a consultant, not to pull oneself out of the fire, not *any* of the things we normally think to do when things head south. These steps may come, or they may not, but the *first* step after facing the crisis is to turn to Jesus, and to do whatever he tells us to do. It reminds me so much of the 12-Step programs like A.A., in which the first steps are to admit that our lives are unmanageable and we are powerless to change them; to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us; and to make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

This is what Jesus' mother tells the servants to do. So they turn the problem over to Jesus, and this is what he tells them: Take the six stone water jars for the rite of purification, and fill them with water. I love the ordinariness and practicality. Jesus tells them to use what they have around, and to fill them with ordinary stuff. They are not to go running to the next village for a golden pitcher; they are not sent to look for some magic ingredients; they are not to go anywhere or find anything, because they already have everything they need. Jesus uses what we already have, not what we think we still need. And what we have will be enough, if we put it in his hands.

Finally, Jesus tells the servants to take some to the chief steward; so again they do as he tells them to. The steward tastes it, not knowing the source of this particular vintage. And he realizes this is extraordinary wine – the very best, beyond anything the wedding feast had served before, and so much of it! Six enormous jars of wine, enough to last some months of celebration. It is stunning. What Jesus has accomplished is more than great wine, too: he has transformed a source of shame back into pride – a deeper pride than it had been before; he has transformed the party’s sorrow back into joy – a greater joy than it had been before; he has transformed the celebration’s emptiness back into abundance – a far more extravagant abundance than could have even been imagined.

This is Jesus’ third mission, a mission he invites us all to join. It is a mission of transformation: of taking what is empty and making it full, of taking whatever ordinary things we offer him, and making them more than enough. In my own life I have seen it happen again and again – and I’ve seen it happen in this church as well.

On this Sunday of our Annual Meeting, I want to celebrate the power of Christ to transform lives ... and I want to celebrate the ways you’ve offered ordinary things to Jesus’ hands, from the very beginning of our life together, pouring ordinary water into ordinary jars. In the 1850s our founders brought an idea to play, of founding a university and a church at the same time, and with a few members and some faithful leadership, 150 years later we have Lake Forest College, and First Presbyterian Church ... ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace. In 1911 this congregation commissioned Dr. and Mrs. Smith to establish a medical ministry in Korea. Their son, Mac Smith, our beloved member just recently passed away; and now, nearly 100 years and many missionaries later, there are far more Korean Presbyterians, millions of them, than American Presbyterians ... ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace.

And so it has been all along. We start a tutoring program for kids, Reading Power, and Jesus transforms the volunteering we do into kids that read, and more than that, into kids that go on to high school, and sometimes college, and become leaders in their own communities. Ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace. And we sort people’s

cast off clothing and furniture and household goods, and Jesus transforms what we do into a community of rich and poor working together over Rummage weekend, and inexpensive items for people who couldn't afford them otherwise, and then five and six figures of cash in mission dollars to give to agencies for their great work. Ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace. And so it is that we offer our voices in the choir and Jesus transforms them into glorious worship, and we offer our building for a mission conference for Peru and Jesus transforms it into a joyful feast of the people of God, gathered from east and west and north and south, a joyful feast of hope ... ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace. And we offer our time and our thought and our leadership for meetings, endless meetings, and Jesus transforms them into ministry and mission, fellowship and joy ... ordinary water into ordinary jars, transformed into extraordinary grace.

There are so many places of emptiness and need and sorrow in our world, perhaps in our own lives. Sometimes it just feels overwhelming. But here's the promise: when we put what we have into Jesus' hands, he takes our ordinary water, and our ordinary jars, and makes them into a fountain of life, a fountain of blessings and joy, overflowing, more than we could ask or imagine. This congregation is so generous, and we have so many gifts that we're willing to share. I simply can't wait to see what Jesus will do with them next. Amen.