

Today we continue our sermon series entitled New Beginnings with a message about “The Best.” The beginning of a new year offers us a chance to think through what changes we might like to make in our lives to better ourselves. It’s a good and noble pursuit, but things don’t always turn out the way we hope, do they? As we’re just over two weeks into the year, I wonder how you’re doing on your New Year’s resolutions? Often times it’s in these next few weeks that the gym becomes a little less crowded, diets soon return to whatever the status quo was before the holidays, and we settle into the winter season, sometimes despairing at our failed attempts to become better versions of ourselves.

Last year around this time, I confessed to a friend of mine that I just wasn’t happy with certain aspects of my life. All the big things were going fine for the most part – family life, work, and relationships, but coming out of the holidays, I hadn’t exercised in a while and I was out of shape. I was as heavy as I’d ever been in my life. I generally found myself having a really short fuse with my family...especially my kids. In short, I confessed to my friend, “I’m just not the best version of myself right now.” He listened then wisely said, “Well, it’s the only version of yourself that you’ve got. Don’t be too hard on yourself.” He reminded me that even if I wasn’t *at my best*, I was *trying my best*, and sometimes that’s the best we can do. I was grateful for that perspective and for the grace in his response.

Today’s scripture is a story about God’s best. Not surprisingly it’s also a story about grace. Hear this word from John chapter 2.

John 2:1 *On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.*

3 *When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."*

4 *And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."*

5 *His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*

6 *Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.*

8 *He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.*

9 *When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom*

10 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."

11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Water into wine¹ – Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel. It's an interesting thing for John to lead with, don't you think? Jesus enters the scene not with an act of great compassion, or a merciful healing, or raising someone from the dead. Rather, Jesus' first act of public ministry is resurrecting a dying party! Party on, Jesus!

But maybe we shouldn't be too surprised that Jesus would keep a wedding party going. The Bible repeatedly uses the metaphor of a wedding when describing God's love toward us, and the Bible ends in a huge wedding celebration when Christ returns to marry his bride, the church. The bible certainly warns about the dangers of too much drinking, and countless families have been devastated by alcohol abuse. As with any serious issue, we Christians are compelled to search the scriptures for guidance. And it turns out scripture² has a lot of positive things to say about wine. I'll quote from a preacher friend of mine who lives in Vancouver who once offered these words in a sermon here:³

"In scripture, wine is a sign of God's blessing and bounty. It's an appropriate drink for a thank offering to God in the temple (Ex 29:40, Lev 23:13, Num 15:5-10 & 18:12 & 28:14, Deut 14:23, 15:14 & 18:4), it should be shared especially with those for whom nothing is prepared on the day of the Lord (Neh 8:10); it's a sign of God's renewed covenant with Israel (Is 55:1-3), it's the drink of lovers and the very symbol of love (Song of Songs 5:1, 7:2, 7:9 & 8:2) , and its absence is the end of all joy (Is 24:11). Most importantly for us, Jesus makes it a sign of his blood shed for us, he promises to drink with us again in the kingdom, he promises to be with us when we share wine with one another, and the Holy Spirit uses it as a sign of Pentecost (Mark 15:23, Mt 27:34, Acts 2:13). Whatever else we may think of wine, the Bible thinks it's a powerful sign."⁴

Probably more than you ever wanted to know about what the Bible says about wine. On the off chance you don't have a photographic memory, this is a good time to remind you that the text of our sermons can be found on our website, and we also have some printed copies in the foyer by the church offices.

⁴ From Jason Byassee's sermon 3/15/15 at BUMC

The point of me telling you all this is not to get hung up on the wine. The story is about so much more. We learn that from the very first words,⁵ “On the third day...” Right away our ears perk up because we know big things happen in the Bible on the third day. “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana.” First, a little bit of background - weddings were a big deal in Jesus’ day. In a small town like Cana, nearly everyone would have been invited. Tons of family and friends. It was a week-long celebration. A huge party. To run out of wine when the party was just starting to hit its stride would have been a major social faux pas. This would have been an embarrassment for sure and also a bad way for a couple to start a life together.

Now we all know that weddings never quite go how we plan them. I once officiated a wedding on a mountaintop with a beautiful view that was completely obscured by a downpour just before the ceremony began. We had to scramble to set up inside instead. Thankfully the sun came out in time for pictures afterward. You’ve no doubt heard of or participated in weddings with unexpected guests, bad toasts, misbehaving attendants or family members. My wedding day was the best day of my life. It seemed to me like everything was absolutely perfect. It was only later we found out about all the drama that happened behind the scenes. Weddings never quite go how we plan them.

It was the same with the wedding at Cana. Jesus’ mother comes to him and says they ran out of wine. And I love Jesus’ response. It’s like he’s a stubborn teenager. “Yeah, so...what’s that got to do with us?” I love it when the bible shows us Jesus’ humanity! *I don’t feel like working now, ok mom?!* And then he says another phrase that should catch our ear: “My hour has not yet come.” This story is not just about wine.

I also love Mary’s response. Ever the proud and persistent Jewish mother, Mary wisely says⁶ to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” I should probably end the sermon right here because this is all you really need to know in life: just do whatever Jesus tells you. Amen!

Jesus tells the servants to fill some nearby jars with water, and then he miraculously transforms the water into the best wine ever. And the wedding party is saved.

This passage is about more than just a miracle, but wouldn’t it be nice to have the power Jesus has to instantly make things happen? That way, when we get to this time of year and we reflect on all the ways we want to live better, we could just fill a cup with water, drink it, and BAM! instantly be transformed into our best selves now?!

Unfortunately that's not how life works. Instead it takes time, patience, and persistence to develop habits that slowly transform us. When I was in my funk last year, it was a series of small slow changes over time that helped me out of it. Our Stephen Ministers are reading a book by James White that talks about the importance of creating a rule of life. A rule of life is kind of like a set of New Year's resolutions. It's more about cultivating a lifestyle of discipleship. Saint Benedict⁷ was the first one to come with this concept. He lived around 500 years after Christ, and his rule set the course for western monastic life. The monks at Mepkin Abbey, the monastery we sometimes visit, follow a version of this rule. They invest their time in prayer, work, and rest in ways that try to keep them always aware of God's presence.

One of the things that is so striking about Benedict's rule is its flexibility. It's not a rigid system of do's and don'ts. Rather it accounts for our natural human tendency to be slackers once in a while. Grace is built in to the rule. James White talks about Benedict's rule in this way – he says it's a good thing to sit down and make a list of all the ways you're going to make your life better and how you're going to grow closer to Jesus. But take it slow. Focus on one thing and get that down. Then when that's become habit integrate something else. Slow and steady change produces transformation that's more likely to last.

The truth is that all great spiritual leaders experience inconsistency in their walk with God. Mother Theresa had a decade where she didn't hear anything from God despite her constant prayers. Martin Luther, even after he discovered God's grace, still struggled at times to accept it and live into it. The Apostle Paul has a whole section in Romans 7 where he says "I don't understand my own actions. I don't do the good I want to do but the evil I don't want to do is what I do." It's ok that things don't always go according to our plans, and it's ok to come up short of our ideal selves. Even the best spiritual leaders struggle to practice the presence of God.

I love this little poem by Mary Oliver entitled "Don't Worry".⁸

Things take the time they take.
Don't worry.
How many roads did St. Augustine follow
before he became St. Augustine?

Eugene Peterson calls this kind of spiritual discipline "a long obedience in the same direction." The goal is not following a rule legalistically to check something off a list. The goal is seeking God steadily and consistently so Christ is formed in us, and our lives are transformed for him.

⁸ Poem on screen please. It's from her latest collection: *Felicity*

But no matter how well we plan we can't control everything.⁹ **James 4:13**

*Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." **14** Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*

Sometimes even the best laid plans don't work out. The best rules don't happen. Sometimes we're going to run out of wine just when the party is getting good.

Look again at what Jesus does. After he reluctantly agrees to help, he asks the servants to fill six jars (180 gallons!) full of water. Not just any jars though, jars that were used for Jewish purification; used for the ritual cleansing of hands; used to make people worthy to worship, worthy to be in God's presence. These were symbols of God's covenant with Israel. Jesus takes those empty jars, has them filled with water, and turns it into the best wine ever made.

And again we see the story is more than just about the wine. On the church calendar, we're currently in the liturgical season of Epiphany. It's a season of revelation. This story falls during the Epiphany season because it reveals a greater truth about Jesus. This miracle is a sign pointing to something bigger. It's certainly a sign that Jesus is Messiah. But it's also a revelation about Jesus' mission and purpose. Jesus uses the purification jars of Mosaic law, and he transforms them into symbols of a new covenant – cups of joy, filled to the brim with abundant grace, a sign of God's best.

The cup has always been sign of covenant between God and God's people, a sign of salvation...first for Israel, then for all of us. In the previous chapter of John's gospel John says,¹⁰ "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Jesus lived according to the law. He didn't just follow it perfectly, he embodied it and fulfilled it in order that we might not be bound by it. Instead we are heirs to God's salvation by grace through faith in Christ. As John says¹¹ in 1:16 "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Grace upon grace. Grace in abundance. Just like the jars Jesus filled at the wedding. Filled with the best God has to offer. Grace upon grace. God's best for us.

Jesus is God's best for us. Jesus is God's cup of salvation. When Jesus' hour had fully come, he poured himself out for us and for all the world. We celebrate that when we receive communion.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed he took bread and said, “This is my body, given for you.” And he took the cup and said, “This is my blood, of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.” Grace upon grace, God’s best, poured out for you and for me and for the world.

So the miracle we read about this morning is not just an amazing act of power. It’s a sign of the savior, a sign of God’s salvation, and a sign of the marriage feast to come when Christ will return in final victory and we’ll feast at his heavenly banquet. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

At Cana, they ran out of wine – a symbol of life and blessing. And Jesus blessed them with the best. So the next time you feel like you’re running low on life, or blessings, surrender the jars of your life to Jesus. We bring him our resolutions, our attempts to make our best selves, our hopes and dreams for what we want to become. Some of our jars are half full. Some are running near empty. Some have nothing left in them at all. Yet Jesus pours himself into them, into us, and makes us God’s best.

You see, it isn’t we who make our best selves. We can’t do that on our own. It’s Jesus who makes us our best selves. Regardless of what’s going on in your life, no matter how your New Year’s resolutions are going, no matter how you feel about yourself, know this today: you... are... the best, because you are God’s best version of you.

Last week we remembered our baptisms. We celebrated that through the waters of baptism Jesus pours out grace upon grace over us. And God calls us his beloved. His very best. Not because of anything we’ve done but because of whom we are in Christ. If you didn’t get a chance to remember your baptism last week, I encourage you to do so at the stations in the back. Dip your hand in the water, pick up a stone, and remember that you are God’s beloved. You are God’s best you, filled with God’s Holy Spirit. May Christ fill your cup to the brim now and always with life everlasting. Amen.

Benediction

Midwinter pastor’s conference: part of my rule of life – I’ll be out next two Sundays getting my jar filled through continuing education, worship, and rest.

Mepkin Abbey trips coming up – email or see me or church office

Go as God’s beloved people, and may your cups overflow with grace upon grace. Amen.