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2nd Sunday of Epiphany

Kalamazoo

Jn 2:1-11

The Sign of Wine

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. John writes"

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, ... Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." Amen

Let us hear God's voice in these words of Scripture and dare to follow them, Amen

Water is the staff of life. Our bodies are composed of more than 95 percent water, and without water we do not live for more than a few days. In a dry land such as ancient Israel, water is especially precious. However, for the ancient Jew, water was also a spiritual necessity. Jewish law and ritual required a certain amount of cleanliness that went beyond mere hygiene. There were specific rules about bathing and washing. And unless a Jew followed those rules, he or she was considered unclean and not fit to be in the company of clean people. And so water was very important ritually in Jewish life, in addition to its necessity for life.

Our Gospel for this second Sunday of Epiphany is a story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry: the wedding at Cana in Galilee. And we encounter water, a great deal of water.

John writes that this happened on the "third day." It was Jewish law to bathe on the third and seventh days to keep a person ritually clean. That is probably why this day was chosen for the wedding, so that all, family and guests at the wedding would be pure. And this is probably why the water jars were empty because all the water had been used in bathing in preparation for the wedding. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Not all water was the same in ritual terms. Flowing water was preferred over still water. River water was preferred over rain water. Well water was the best of all as it was considered to be primeval water from the creation. Water containers made of stone preserved the ritual purity of water, but not so fired clay containers.

The ritual bath, called a Mikveh, was used for a full body washing and ideally was fed from a river or stream. If not, properly handled rainwater could be used. This was a small room, sometimes in a building, sometimes not, built into the stone with a double set of stairs, one to enter and one to exit the Mikveh. A minimum of 200 gallons of water was required, and water would flow in and out of the Mikveh. Smaller amounts of water were specified for hand washing, foot washing, face

washing, and so forth. This water would come from the stored water in the house, stored in large stone jars and ladled out by servants. The source of this water would be a well or stream.

It is interesting that Jesus chose these stone water jars for his wine. Wine normally came in wineskins or fired clay bottles, both of which were not as ritually clean as stone containers. Like the water from the well, wine from the stone jars came from a hidden place, known only to the servants. And since these six jars were designed for washing water, they were much larger than wine containers, about 120-180 gallons, and they had been filled to the brim!

John in his gospel calls this action of Jesus a sign, not a miracle. As we have seen previously, a sign points to something greater than itself. So the point of John's story is not the making of lots of good wine from water, but something more important. Notice the last verse where St. John writes: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

This action of Jesus pointed to Himself and His glory so that the disciples could believe in Him as being sent by God.

From our vantage point in history, we can glimpse God's nature in this sign.

First, Jesus worked within framework of Jewish custom and law. He used what He was given, trusting in God. By using the stone jars He was affirming the purity laws and going beyond them. His wine was ritually more pure than normal wine. Not only that, it tasted a lot better as well. Jesus is demonstrating the abundance of God which He desires for his people. Like the nature of God in providing for His people, beginning with the Garden of Eden, nothing is too good for His people.

The second thing we notice that Jesus was responding to a need. At first Jesus seems to ignore his mother's request. Only when the need is real, does He provide the necessary wine.

There is also the meaning of wine itself. Wine was used at weddings and feasts. At other times, wine was used just to take away the brackish taste of water, but at feasts it was served at full strength as a sign of joy. We might remember this meaning of wine when we come to the communion table. The Lord's Supper is a joyous event celebrating our forgiveness by our gracious God.

This story about the wedding at Cana in Galilee is sign pointing to Jesus of Nazareth, sent to us by God. Jesus used a lot of water to show us a sign by wine. Now that God has our attention, let us believe His Son and follow Him, for He has prepared a feast for all His believers. And believe me, the wine will not run out!

Amen