

YOUR FIRST CLUE

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

January 17, 2010

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(Second Sunday after the Epiphany)



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Lectionary Texts:

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

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”

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

⁵His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

⁷Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.”

And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.”

So they took it. ⁹When 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 ¹⁰and 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.”

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

I would suspect that as we gather for worship this day, our minds are full of the images of the utter devastation and tragedy from the earthquake in Haiti. We all know about hurricanes. We give names to hurricanes. We track them for days before they hit and talk about them by name for years after they are gone. It is almost a personal relationship. But an earthquake is so unexpected and impersonal and so utterly devastating, especially in a poor country like Haiti. There's no time to make predictions. Tens of thousands have died, and the number of injured and homeless is in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Haiti is one of the poorest countries

on earth to begin with and now this. Slaves were brought there by the Spanish and French colonists. They revolted in the early 1800's and became independent. The United States along with other countries were threatened by slave revolts and have never really tried to help them all that much.

I went to Haiti on a mission trip years ago. It impacted me as much as anything I've ever done. The images of the children there are still etched in my memory as are the poverty and harsh conditions and how hard the people try to make it every day. The United Methodist Church has had a long and significant mission presence in Haiti. At the time of the earthquake, there were seven different United Methodist groups from the United States in Haiti and three UMCOR workers. One of the United Methodist groups was from Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, a member of which died. All of the American United Methodists are now accounted for, and most are safe. Unfortunately, Clint Rubb and Sam Dixon of UMCOR died from injuries sustained in the earthquake. Additionally, there were five members of the Rotary Club of Houston, all of whom I know, who were there at the time and are now safely back in Houston.

For the people of Haiti, however, there is no escape. People all over the world and especially in the United States are responding with various kinds of aid.

Our United Methodists channel to help is printed in our bulletin today. UMCOR has been there for years and can be trusted. I hope all of you will respond as you are able to real human need that is really not that far from us. Responding to people in need is at the very heart of the life and teachings of Jesus. It is what Christian people do. Television personalities who have suggested otherwise have revealed a very misguided theology. Let it be said clearly that tragedies like the one we now see in Haiti are not done by God to punish a whole city of men, women, and children. In our world, tragedies happen to individuals and sometimes, through natural disasters and human neglect or intention, to large groups of people. You and I and all people of faith and even people of no faith are called on to be good neighbors, to treat others like we would want to be treated ourselves. So, let us give, let us pray, let us do everything we can to help a people in need.

It is a mysterious thing how almost any scripture passage speaks to almost any human condition. Our reading from John's gospel today is no different. Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. An everyday event disintegrates into a crisis and Jesus responds. It is a very familiar pattern. But if the pattern of Jesus helping people in need is very familiar, this particular story is a bit odd. Why would Jesus care if they ran out of wine at a wedding celebration? Actually, there are lots of things odd about this story. Jesus' exchange with his mother is odd. She insists that he do something about what would be a very serious social blunder. In that culture, it would have been a great embarrassment for the host to run out of wine at the celebration of the marriage of their daughter. Nevertheless, Jesus seems frankly disrespectful to his mother when she insists that he do something. Now all of the commentaries say this would have been a typical exchange of the day and that our 21st century sensitivities see and hear it differently. OK. I can accept that, and the gospel writers would never want to put Jesus in a bad light, but the exchange still sounds odd.

Be that as it may, this passage is not about wine or weddings or mother-son exchanges. It is about the nature and identity of Jesus. John calls it the first of what turns out to be seven signs in his gospel that reveal something to us about the nature of Jesus. So, what does turning water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee tell us about the nature of Jesus?

A typical wine skin or wine jug would have held about a gallon of wine. He could have produced a few of those and that would have been enough at this stage of the party. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he used the six stone jars holding 20-30 gallons of water each for the rites of purification. He used those jars, which would have produced 150 or so gallons of wine, a lot of wine for a wedding celebration in a very small town. It is an abundance, an excess, way too much.

What is it that is excessive or extravagant about the nature of Jesus?

Sometimes the words and practice of excess and extravagance are even offensive to us. We like moderation or even frugality in most settings. What is it that is extravagant about the nature of Jesus?

Remember, this is a sign event, a story replete with symbolism galore. Jesus is extravagant with life, with new life, with making the ordinary special and with love for people. In these ways, Jesus is extravagant. In these areas where there is scarcity, he brings extravagance. Where there is a scarcity of hope or help or love, he brings an extravagance of these things and asks us to do the same, as in Haiti today. A nation close to us has a scarcity of hope and help in the form of food and water and shelter and medical supplies, and the world appropriately has responded with extravagance.

Wine in our story is a sign of life, of new life that comes from Jesus. If this is the first of the signs, we know that it holds true throughout the gospel. Jesus will continue to be too extravagant when it comes to mercy for sinners, love for outcasts, restoration of life to all kinds of people deemed unworthy, and in demands of justice and righteousness in society. In these matters, he demands extravagance of us all. It is our first clue as to the nature of Jesus. We should have gotten it from the very beginning of this story. John begins his story with the words, “On the third day...” There’s really no context for those words in the sense of what has happened in the preceding chapter. It is not really a chronological reference. No, those words are really the first clue. “On the third day...” as everyone who read it in John’s time would have known, anticipates the resurrection. Against all odds, the extravagance of mercy love and justice will have the last word. Thanks be to God.

Dr. Bill Mallard, Chandler School of Theology professor, once gave a class a choice of either writing a term paper and sitting for a final exam or condensing the whole New Testament into one sentence. The class took the latter, thinking anything would be better than writing a paper and standing for a final exam. Then they discovered it would not be quite so easy. First they had to read the entire New Testament to understand what it said. The class had to reach an agreement on the essential message. Then they had to choose words and fashion one sentence to capture the essence and the spirit of the early church. When the term was over they presented their sentence, “Listen! A whole new world is breaking in, and taking us along with it.” That’s their sentence. Yours no doubt would be something similar.

What will you say and do on your final exam?

In the harsh realities of our world there is often a scarcity of mercy, love, and justice. Jesus brings an abundance, even an extravagance of these things. Those of us who call his name are called to do the same. As Christians, we believe against all odds that the ways of Jesus will one day prevail.