

“Just wait until you taste this!”
 Isaiah 62:1-5 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 John 2:1-11

As I have prayed through these scriptures this week it has been impossible to ignore the news and the images we have been seeing of the scope of human loss caused by the earthquake in Haiti. We are moved to pray, “Lord, have mercy, and Lord, fill us with your compassion.” One thing that I am humbly reminded of is how precious is the gift of community and the life we share together.

We have a very local reminder of that. Here in Palmetto this week we have been enjoying the exhibits of the Manatee County Fair. We very much enjoyed seeing the swine show on Tuesday evening and afterwards had a great time touring the exhibits in the Arts and Crafts Show as well as the Public School Art Show. Our church was very well represented.

Eddie Mercurio was awarded a blue ribbon for his pig Mr Bojangles. If his Dad Tim has a bit of a strong aura this morning, well, he has been herding pigs all week long, so it is a very honest aura. Carley Mercurio won a blue ribbon for both her Fruit Cake and Strawberry Jam. In the Public School Art Show Sharon Taylor’s students from Palm View have a great display of about 160 Terra Cotta Warriors, very impressive. You are likely to buy a ticket from some of our members on the way in and when you peruse the Arts and Crafts Show you will see some members of our Manatee Woodcarving Club there and Ann Marshall is putting in long hours. Sue Revell serves on the Board and Eileen Hoffner has had the principal responsibility for arranging the arts and crafts display. I guarantee you, it is better than anything on television.

Ann told me about a column in Thursdays Herald by Vin Mannix. I want to read you part of it:

“If your macadamia nut cookie didn’t win best dessert at the Manatee County Fair, I’m sorry. I could have eaten a bagful. If your chocolate mousse cake didn’t get the purple rosette, I don’t understand. I loved it! If your blackberry and elderberry jam didn’t win anything, I’m outraged. I gave it 5’s across the board for appearance, texture, and taste.

Truth is, I wrote down a lot of 5’s on the scorecards while judging the desserts for the fair’s culinary arts and food category last Saturday. Me, a judge?

OK, maybe I wasn’t one of “the most qualified judges available” as stated in the official rules. But I know what I like. I like everything. (I’ve never met this reporter, but he is my kind of guy.) The raw apple cake. The chocolate peanut butter bar. The pumpkin cream cheese truffles. Yum.

The two judges I sat with were much more discerning. Disciplined too. They would take a small bite, put the remainder aside, then write down their scores. I, on the other hand, ate it all. Including the leftovers they’d offer me.

Scoring was simple. 1 or 2 meant you really didn’t like something. I never went there. 3 meant you neither liked nor disliked it. Rarely went there. 4 or 5, you liked it moderately or extremely. I gave out a lot of those. I’m easy to please.”¹

¹ Bradenton Herald, January 14, B-1.

I can identify a lot with that description. I liked the cartoon for Shoe the same day. The waitress at the diner asks Shoe, "Have you discovered why you are putting on weight?" To which Shoe replies, "Yes, I have a very slow metabolism ... and a very fast fork."

All that is to say, I don't think either Vin Mannix or I would qualify as a steward who could pronounce judgment on the quality of the wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. This wine that the steward tasted was not just good; it was not just a 4 or a 5. It was the best of show. When he tastes it, he calls for the bridegroom and asks him, "Why have you saved the best for the last?" And the bridegroom has no answer.

What we are told is that Jesus did this, the first of his signs. This is more than a miracle; this is a sign. There is a significant difference. The gospel does not want us to look at them in and of themselves; he wants us to look at what they point to. The point is not to read this and say, "Wow! I wonder HOW he did that?" The gospel wants us to respond, "Wow! I wonder WHO did that and what do we need to do to follow him?"

Paying too much attention to the miracle is like going to a restaurant and spending all evening reading and talking about the menu instead of enjoying the feast. So let's see what is revealed when we look at this story as a sign.

A sign has several characteristics. It begins by telling you where you are. It establishes a direction and a destination. And it is possible that it gives a sense of what is in store on this journey. But a sign also makes an assumption as well. It assumes that there is a motivation to begin the journey in the first place. There is something within us, some motivation, some appetite that desires to make the journey.

There are at least two clues here to the destination that Jesus will be directed toward. The first phrase "on the third day," the third day of what? Then John begins by telling us that the mother of Jesus was there. The next time in the gospel that an even is described as being on the third day is the crucifixion of Jesus, and in the gospel of John, the only other place where Mary, the mother of Jesus is mentioned at all is also at the crucifixion. That was to be his hour. That was when he would be prepared to receive his bride. That was when his mission would be accomplished.

There is every indication that this wedding had not been adequately prepared for. We can only guess why the wine ran out. We are told that Jesus and his disciples had been invited. Perhaps when the invitations went out the bridegroom didn't realize how many disciples Jesus actually had; perhaps he had not counted on how thirsty they all were. Whatever the reason, this wedding feasts was on the verge of fizzling out because the bridegroom's reserves of wine had been completely depleted. He was emptied and, socially, this would have been a huge humiliation for him. From then on it would be how his wedding would be remembered, the wedding that ran out of wine.

Years ago when Johnny Carson was the host of The Tonight Show he interviewed an eight year old boy. The young man was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coalmine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that

the young man was a Christian. So Johnny asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?" "Last week," came his reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience roared, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. Then he said, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!" The little boy was on to something. Weddings are a time of Joy. That was and is Jesus mission. He says later in John, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly, and the joy of the Holy Spirit comes in direct proportion to our willingness to be emptied of all that separates us from the deep, abiding love of God.

Cana of Galilee was not a place that had much prestige. It was a small town kind of place, but something extraordinary happened there that day. I have been thinking about this as a Pastor. I have occasion to listen to many people tell how about when the love and mercy and forgiveness of Christ became real in their lives. Almost without exception what I hear over and over is people telling about times when they were emptied, times when their lofty expectations were smashed, times when their wine ran out.

How do we deal with the threat of humiliation? How do we avoid being made vulnerable in the eyes of others? We all want to at least appear that we know what we are doing. We want to sound like we know what we are talking about. We want to be competent, yet our deepest spiritual relationships are beyond our need to appear respectable and competent.

Jesus instructs the servant to use the six stone jars used for the rite of purification. We can safely assume that all of those jars would have been emptied by the guests when they arrived. The guests used them to wash the dust and the mud of the road off of themselves. Ritually they had all been purified, but symbolically we are being shown that just appearing pure and holy on the outside is not an end in itself. That is such an important thing for us in the church to learn over and over again.

Sometimes even our most zealous efforts at holiness can go off track. There was a fellow in a small town that was known as the biggest drunk in town. He prided himself that he could drink everyone under the table until finally he ended up under the table himself. And couldn't get up. He finally had a very dramatic conversion experience, a complete turnaround, and just like that he became the most committed Christian you ever saw.

He was the first one to church every Sunday. He not only went to Sunday school, he also taught Sunday school. He was eager to serve on all the committees at church. When the season of Lent came around he practiced all of the spiritual disciplines, until finally one by one all the other church members fell away one by one. This fellow had out Christianed everyone else, he had prayed everyone under the table. Holiness is not an end in itself.

Jesus repurposed these purification jars and Mary told Jesus to follow Jesus instructions. The path that Jesus leads is a humble path that simply asks for our obedience to do what he asks us to do, to love God, to love our neighbor,

to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit those in prison, to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our Lord. This is the path of joy of an incredibly different quality of life so different we name it eternal.

How do we describe the fullness of what that is like? We can't. It is beyond each of us. I hope you have had a taste of it, a taste of that joy, a taste of that love, a taste of that mercy, a taste of that forgiveness that is beyond understanding, beyond the joy that we can ever accomplish on our own.

Our fears, our hatreds, our selfishness, can drain our capacity to love as God loves us. There is only one way to bring health and wholeness back into our broken lives. As Jesus showed so clearly at his first hour and in his final hour—our lives must be poured out for others.

I have been told that once the cork comes out of the bottle even the best wine will eventually turn to vinegar — sour and worthless, completely unpalatable. A life that is not poured out for others, A life that is not given in service and love to others, A life lived for self alone, That life sours.

Eternal Life cannot be hoarded or stockpiled for oneself. As soon as we attempt to deny it to others, it goes sour on us every time. But, oh the joy, of sharing it as freely with others as it has been shared with us.

How can we describe what that is like? In a book called “The Case for Heaven” I read about a former president of Yale University named Arthur Twining Hadley. He was known as a brilliant connoisseur of wine. He was famous for his ability to name not only the type and year of a wine but also the vineyard where the grapes had been grown and ripened. Pretty impressive.

His faculty came up with a scheme to stump him. One evening at a faculty dinner, they challenged him to name the wine being served. Hadley sipped the wine and named it without hesitation. His faculty said no. He took another sip, and guessed again. Again, the faculty said no. Four times Hadley sipped and guessed. After the fourth try, he finally admitted defeat.

What Hadley had succeeded in doing was naming all four vineyards that surrounded the field where these grapes had been grown, but this was the first crop that had ever come from this new vineyard, therefore he had no reference point.

Eternal life, the life that Jesus Christ poured out his life to give us is just like that. We have no reference point to define that joy, but in Jesus Christ it is a gift freely and abundantly given.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
January 17, 2010
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto