



September 13, 2015

Larry DeLong

First and Last – or at Least Recent (John 2:1-12)

This scene from John's Gospel is about water, wine, and signs. A *sign* is a marker that tells us what something is, or what to do. The sign here is Jesus' turning water into wine. The question is, what does this sign mean to you and me?

Signs are everywhere, whether concrete or symbolic.

Lightning and thunder may be signs that it's about to rain, though just across the street. Pain may be the sign of a health problem. And many of us, whether we'll admit it, have asked God for a sign, or wondered if God is giving us one. Signs aren't always clear, though, and many signs are only recognized in hindsight.

I once had a dog named Herman. Herman was a Maltese, a little white dog with black eyes and nose; a lap dog, very devoted. He slept with me – kind of insisted on it, in fact.

But he did have one annoying habit.

Have you ever been in that place where you're not quite asleep, but not really awake? What's real and what's in your head gets jumbled? You're not sure if the phone is really ringing, or you're dreaming? Well, every morning, Herman would work his

way up the bed from my feet to my head, moving me into that sort of dreamy mode. And he'd breathe gently on my face: I can still remember feeling his soft, warm breath.

Then, he'd take the very tip of his tongue, and touch my nose, ever so softly. Cute, huh? What a wonderful, gentle way to wake up.

Problem was, if I didn't jump out of bed within five seconds of that tongue-touch, he'd wet on me, and I'd spend the next half-hour changing the bed and getting the laundry going. Herman was giving me a sign, letting me know it was time to get up. Even though I knew what he was doing (and the consequences), I still missed his sign sometimes – until too late.

Another: I was driving on the frontage road, and a couple in a golf cart was in front of me. As you know, it's illegal to drive a golf cart there. At the first sign that reads "Golf Carts Prohibited," one pointed out the sign, and they looked at each other and laughed. Then they drove past the turn that could have taken them off their path of crime, and came to the next sign banning golf carts. Again, they pointed to it, and laughed.

Sometimes, you can see a sign clearly, understand it perfectly, but not realize that it is meant for you. They might not have enjoyed the ride so much if a sheriff's deputy had been there.

This Jesus story is about the first of Jesus' signs. So what does this sign say to us?

Well, that's wrapped up in this water-into-wine business.

Everyone knows this story. Even if they can't recall the details, everyone recognizes Jesus' turning water into wine.

Of course, ever since, many Christians have been trying to turn that wine back into water! And, no, it wasn't unfermented grape juice that Jesus and everyone else drank: it was wine. Watered down sometimes, perhaps; but it was wine, that the Psalmist says "makes (our) hearts glad."

Now, I'm not making a case for drinking alcohol – not only can that be a terrible problem, it's a choice in our modern society, not the necessity it was then, and there are many who simply can't tolerate alcohol.

No, the point is that the very first sign that Jesus performed he did to keep a good party going. The sign said: life is to be enjoyed, and Jesus is there to help.

Sure, Jesus had already been busy: he'd called some disciples; he'd been identified by John the Baptist as the Messiah and been teaching; but it's this act, that marks the start of Jesus' work, and we're even told that it was this event that led his disciples to "believe in him."

So this sign is a really big deal. It's the start of something. It's the start of everything we're still doing.

A young Sunday School student, asked what she got from this story, answered: "Make sure you invite Jesus to your party."

Well, yeah. We could quit now, but we won't.

The funny thing about this surprising, miraculous first sign is that Jesus was pushed into it. Before his mother speaks to him, he seems content to be an ordinary guest, sit on the sidelines, enjoy the party.

He's even a bit – maybe not annoyed, but at least - surprised that Mary thinks *he* needs to do something just because the caterer messed up the beverage order.

Perhaps Jesus was waiting for a sign himself about when to get things started. He says, "My hour has not yet come."

Perhaps Jesus didn't know just what his sign would be, or when or from where it would come, just like us. It took a bit of reflection before he realized that the sign he was waiting for was this nudge from his mother.

After all, who'd expect that a gentle kiss from your dog in the morning was a sign you were about to do the laundry?

But however this event came to be, the implications for us are really wonderful. Jesus likes a good party. How about you?

If nothing else, believers don't *need* to be gloomy. God's happy you're here; God's happy you are, period. Why not be happy too?

So this is the first sign. Jesus did others, and I believe with all my heart that he's still doing them, and that the very last sign will be very much like the first: surprising, and joyous. It will be a big celebration, a time of being right there in the moment, whooping it up with friends and forgetting about all the junk that we've been worrying about and carrying with us for too long.

Given all the horror and disaster and fear and tragedy we've been wading through in the recent past, I'll bet that kind of laugh-out-loud joy sounds pretty attractive, and it's supposed to be.

Still, it can be mighty hard to find joy and celebration in a hospital room, or in a nasty diagnosis, or when you've got enough pain medication onboard that you don't know what day it is – or something has happened to someone you love, someone you know, or just something you've heard on the news is plain awful.

But the kind of joy that Jesus offers us is different. It's something sweet and small inside you. There's a spark of the divine, a happy, exciting, fun spark in us that needs to be fed, like the beginnings of a campfire that needs to be breathed on and tended until it can cook hot dogs and s'mores and have stories told around it. Something that God put there that the world can't take

away – that’s the joy of Jesus. And we know that because he turned water to wine.

Now, you may have buried this spark so deep that you don’t even know it’s there. The last time anyone may have seen it in you was in a baby picture. But I’m here to tell you that that joy, that exuberance, is still there. No matter what. The Holy Spirit won’t let it go out.

I got back to my mother’s West Virginia home this summer and saw her and my brother. The Presbyterian Church in that town was my first call over thirty years ago. It became my Mom’s church home, ordained my once-agnostic brother an elder, and celebrated its two-hundredth anniversary while I was there.

Back when I served that church, we were just starting to see signs of approaching decline, but they were faint: that church was a major force in the community, only one of its six hundred members briefly out of work at a time and in a place with an unemployment rate over twenty-five percent. Now, their current fireball of a pastor told me with incredible enthusiasm, “I’ve finally got them to start thinking of themselves as a small church!”

Well, when there are thirty in the congregation in the summer when there *were* thirty in the bell choir, that’s something.

And, surprisingly, it’s something to be joyful about. Because they are happy together. They work out their salvation and live the

gospel and care for themselves and their community. They had - they're having - a party, because Jesus loves parties, and parties are good places to find signs of God's activity and presence.

Which finally brings us back to Cana. That wedding was a pretty amazing party, given the amount of wine Jesus created – somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons.

But what was wrong with water? After all, it's essential. Wine's a luxury, and not everyone can enjoy it. Well, life itself can be pretty plain, but it, too, is precious. And there's more to it, a level beyond plain, just like that wine was a level beyond water. God offers that *something more* to us, free for the asking, in Christ, who took something precious, plain, but essential, water, and made it better. He added spirit, you might say. He'd love to do the same for us: take our lives – also infinitely precious – and make them better, fill them up with the Spirit, and celebrate over us as others see and join the party.

So, don't forget to invite Jesus to your party – or to church, like that big old small church in West Virginia does. Church is where the big party should really be!

One closing thought. The ancient Christian scholar Ambrose was teaching on this story when one of his students asked: "Did they drink *all* that wine?"

Ambrose answered, “No, there’s always more.” Let’s join the party.