

After officiating at a wedding, my wife and I came to the Reception at a Winery, where one among the Groomsmen challenged: "Pastor, if I become a Muslim, I am guaranteed 35 Teen aged Virgins in Heaven, what kind of deal can you offer?" I responded, "Sounds like a 12 year olds Slumber Party. Why do you want that?" Actually, this morning involves the gifts we do receive as part of the Community of faith.

On Christmas Eve, we had a Visitor whom I greeted at the door saying he had come to see if we would change water into wine. I replied that it was the wrong night for that SIGN of faith, as we were celebrating the Incarnation that Almighty God had become not just human, but an infant; I wish that that night I had known my calendar to tell him to come back this morning!

According to the Gospel of John, walking on water, healing leprosy, changing water into wine are not called MIRACLES, but SIGNS, each is a revelation pointing us to deeper belief. How often, people attempt to read the Bible from beginning to end as if a Novel or Textbook. The difficulty is with the Bible is that we need to stop, as with allowing a cup of tea to steep, permitting the Holy Spirit time to work on us, transforming us through revelation of those signs. We have become so self-reliant, so powerful, knowing and confident, we want not simply to witness a miracle, but to choose the miracle we want. Receiving this gift, we do not question What the gift means or What it says about the Giver, we question having received Wine when we wanted a Margarita.

The Mother of Jesus, Jesus and his disciples went to a wedding.

First, we need to appreciate the Biblical Context, a Jewish Wedding in the first Century was not about the Bride's Dress, not about the Music or the Flowers. The issue is not the Pre-Nuptial Agreement. A Wedding is Celebration of Blessings! Our child is an adult and making a Life Commitment to Love, for all the community to celebrate. There is no expense too great, because this Party reflects the Blessings we want them to enjoy. In a 1st Century Jewish Wedding, the one thing you would plan to prevent at all costs is running out of Wine, because in this Greco-Roman world Wine was a symbol of fertility, of a rich and plentiful harvest, of good life, and of children. Typically, a Jewish Wedding began on the Tuesday before when the Groomsmen lit the Bride's maids oil lamps and came seeking the Bridegroom. Imagine if the groomsmen arrived discovering there was no wine, by the Sabbath, when the Wedding took place, and they still had no wine, can you imagine the discussion at the Safeway on Monday morning?! That poor bride! To have had no wine is to have no Good Life, no blessings, no hope! The Mother of Jesus tries to spare the Bride shame and embarrassment by telling Jesus to do something.

There is a North American 20th Century habit, I hope to disillusion us of. When reading Holy Scripture from the Bible in Worship, we have made every word sacred, trying not to demonstrate inflection, to hide emotion, as if the words are without caring. The Bible is filled with emotion, there are word pictures here, where we need to hear the inflection. "On the 3rd day" is this reference to Resurrection being The 3rd Day? Or following the Sabbath, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday Mary and Jesus and the Disciples arrived with the Groomsmen and Oil Lamps? "A Wedding took place at Cana in Galilee" Where was the home of Jesus and Mary at Nazareth in Galilee. So this was a local small town wedding. "As they arrived, Jesus' Mother said 'They Have no wine!' To which Jesus replied: "Mother! What is this to me? My time has not yet come." Being a good Jewish Mother, what did his mother say to the servants "Just do whatever he tell you."

As with most things Biblical, this sign has 3 parts. Jesus turns water into wine. This is miraculous! In the Greco-Roman world, water filtration and purification did not happen, so people did not drink water, they drank wine instead. It would have been miraculous, simply for Jesus to make the water drinkable,

as Moses had done during 40 years in the Wilderness... but instead, Jesus changed the water into wine! SECOND, the Master of the Banquet tasted the wine, describing this as the finest of vintage; and questioning why the best was reserved until after the ordinary had been consumed? What is the meaning of this sign? Perhaps John's answer at the beginning of his Gospel for why the Messiah had not been revealed in the Old Testament.

BUT THIRD, how much water was changed to Wine? Six 30 Gallon Jars, 180 Gallons of Wine! This is not simply "enough", the Messiah has provided a Super Abundance! No one need ever be shamed or embarrassed again. Imagine now the conversations at Safeway on Monday morning! "What Blessings were given to that couple! Oh How they are loved by their community, by God Almighty!"

The greatest difficulty with Christian Faith was described by the Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr a century ago: "Christianity has not been tried and found impossible, It has been found hard and left untried."

Three aspects of the Letter to the Corinthians intrigue.

First, Corinth had been a Greek City, and the Romans deported all the indigenous population, then brought people from other parts of the Roman Empire in; very much like our living in Green Valley, but being from Minnesota or Iowa, Green Bay or Syracuse or Colorado, and felt somewhat superior by being from better places than others. This letter was written 2000 years ago, to a community in a vastly different culture, on the opposite side of the world, and yet how much this applies to you and I today! The Corinthian Church was casting about for their future mission. While everyone had come through great hardship and illnesses in recent years, some saw the easiest way, was to fall back into old habits and behaviors as before they had come to faith. Some perceived that they possessed certain gifts, and lauded these over others, as if those who could speak in tongues were somehow more spiritual or had a greater gift of prophecy, than others.

Second, in the world today, we often refer to a grandchild or great-grandchild as being "Gifted" meaning that they are inherently blessed with multiple abilities, or that they are a protégé in some discipline. I have a very close friend, who is incredibly handsome, 6'3", he was an All American in Wrestling and Football, a Professional Football Player and Partner in a Law Firm, as well as an acclaimed Author, when he discovered that actually the gift he had been given was Family, his wife and children and their children.

The Apostle Paul recognized that the real gift is that every GIFT comes in our being in relationship to Jesus Christ! As such, we each possess some sign of his love. A GIFT is not earned, or deserved, our Gifts come from God. Perhaps it is in Teaching; possibly the Holy Spirit in you provides the SIGN of interpreting what others have said. I knew a woman who possessed an amazing gift, most of the time she sat very quietly, but occasionally, especially at the completion of a meeting she was able to summarize and encapsulate the heart of what had been talked around in discussion. Each and every one of us possesses a gift from God, unique from anyone else. Only God possesses them all, as humans we are individuals.

However says Paul, as individual parts of the body of Christ, the Church, we are able to use our gifts together to help one another. There is an old description of the distinction between Heaven and Hell. After you die you are brought into a great banquet hall where there is every kind of feast; however, the utensils, the forks and spoons are each 3 feet long. In Hell, every person agonizes how they cannot possibly hold one end of the three foot long utensil and put the other end in our mouth. Food is right

there, the utensils are in their hands, but they are starving for lack of food. In Heaven, every person uses their utensil to feed someone else.