



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 1, 2015
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
BE THOU MY VISION

Open Our Eyes to God's Imagination Romans 4:13-25; John 2:1-11

The story of the wedding at Cana of Galilee is famous for many reasons. We ministers use it as a prooftext of Jesus' affirmation of marriage between two people as a meaningful choice in life. The Gospel writer John refers to what happened as a "sign" rather than a "miracle" because he and the other disciples interpreted it as a revelation of Jesus' glory. Clearly the story establishes that God will direct Jesus' divine mission rather than any human authority—even Jesus' mother. In order to exercise her authority, she has to turn to the servants and instruct them to do whatever Jesus says.¹

We tend to see Mary as the stereotypical Jewish mother making someone else's problem her own and trying to get other people to take care of it. I think Mary is essential to the story because she is the one who causes Jesus to pay attention to something that otherwise might not seem important to him. Why did she think her son could do anything about the lack of wine? Why was he willing and able to do something after all?

Sometimes we think of God's power as a form of magic. Those of you who are old enough to remember the television sitcom *Bewitched* know that all Samantha had to do was twitch her nose to get whatever she desired. Jesus was not, however, a magician. He had no magic wand. As far as we know, he never twitched his nose to make something happen. Yet extraordinary things did happen when Jesus was around.

Let us consider this story from a different angle. In the turning of the water into wine, we see not only Jesus' power and authority at work, but we see him begin to look differently at everything around him.

We have all been to wedding parties. I suspect that in first century Palestine wedding parties were much the same as they are now. There was feasting and dancing, speeches and toasts. Family and friends visited with one another and enjoyed the celebration. Picture Jesus and his

¹Gerald L. Borchert, "The Gospel of John," *Merger Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds., (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 1049.

friends—Peter, James, John, Philip, and Andrew among them—chatting, swapping stories, talking about Jesus' plans to travel and teach.

An embarrassing situation was about to occur. Jewish weddings often lasted a week and were rather expensive. Whether someone had not properly planned for the occasion or money was insufficient, the wine was running out, a huge faux pas then as now. I recall being at a wedding reception a few years ago when I witnessed the father of the bride handing one of his helpers some cash to make a run to the nearby Food Lion to buy more wine. Where was Mary when you needed her? Being a good host spans time and place.

Somehow Mary was in on the problem and took it upon herself to do something. She turned to her firstborn son for a solution, but Jesus was in a dilemma. What could he do? There was no Food Lion in Cana. The Gospels tell us he was poor, so it is unlikely he had money to help buy more wine. Could he persuade a friend to allow him to raid his wine cellar? Looking around the courtyard for an idea, Jesus spotted the large jars used for purification ceremonies, each holding about 20-30 gallons each. He instructed the servants to fill the containers with fresh water and have the steward (who was the Master of Ceremonies for the feast) taste it. As John reports, the steward discovered wine, not water, in the jugs and gushed that it was far better than any that had been served at the feast thus far.

Plain jugs. Ordinary water. Extraordinary wine. At Mary's urging, Jesus had used his imagination to resolve the problem of the wine. Here was a sign of Jesus' divine power: ordinary things hold the key to extraordinary results. Those jugs were reserved for routine purification ceremonies. Jesus gave them a new purpose of brimming with the finest wine in the city.

I like to re-purpose things and find unusual uses for ordinary items. For instance, did you know that an ordinary turkey baster works great to remove water from a Christmas tree stand? Don't tell my wife!! How many of you have warm and beautiful quilts in your home which at one time were nothing but a bag of scrap pieces of cloth? Just south of here, in the community of Lucama, the late Vollis Simpson transformed discarded metal pieces and parts into colorful, fantastical, and delightful works of moving art that are treasured throughout the world. Seen by the right eye, captured by unbridled imagination, ordinary things can take on an extraordinary life.

If you will notice, once Jesus set out on his ministry, which he did after the wedding celebration in Cana, he paid a lot of attention to the little details about people and places. He noticed people who were ill and outcast and forgotten. He saw Zacchaeus up a tree and an abused woman down in the street, surrounded by an angry mob. He saw a woman offering her last mite for the temple ministry and a child with a simple lunch of fish and bread. Jesus noticed how people acted when invited to a banquet as well as how the poor were treated when hungry. He saw children who disappointed their parents and parents who disappointed their children. He noticed flowers in the fields and birds in the air. He saw every detail around him and made those things the material of his ministry.

Last week our guests from South Africa reminded us that our calling is to partner with God in restoring the earth and making his presence among us evident in all that we do. In Sunday School, they told us of how many rural churches are opening their doors to children in the community to provide a space for education. They have no chairs or other resources, but the children are grateful to have a safe, warm, dry place in which to learn. A room with little more than four walls, a ceiling, and a floor becomes an important educational building when filled with children eager to learn.

I have seen things like this happen before. In fact, I have seen them happen in this community. An empty school became a resource center for its neighborhood and a shelter for a dozen homeless families. An abandoned tobacco processing plant became the center of artistic and cultural activities in our community. A vacant lot on the corner of Grace Street and Western Avenue blossomed into a neighborhood park complete with a brick sitting area and a Little Library. An empty big box building evolved from a place selling home improvement supplies to a church which provides all of the materials needed to improve lives. If you do not think God is still at work in this community and throughout the world, just pay attention to some small, seemingly insignificant thing or idea that is changing life for people. You will discover that God is very much alive and well and at work among us.

It is a box, an ordinary-looking wooden box attached to a four-bedroom home in a poor neighborhood in Seoul, South Korea. It might be a box for storing small garden tools or toys or receiving small packages. Nothing about it stands out except that when you open the box you find a soft blanket colored in pink and blue—and a little bell rings. The bell alerts Pastor Lee Jong-rak that someone has deposited a small package, but this package has

not been delivered by UPS. It has been placed there by someone who doesn't want it or can't take care of it. The "package" is an unwanted baby.

The babies delivered to Pastor Lee's home have serious illnesses or birth defects. In South Korea, physical perfection is highly valued while children born with deformities are not valued. Pastor Lee and his wife had a son twenty-nine years ago who had cerebral palsy. For a month Lee hid the child from his wife because he could not bear to tell her the truth. As he visited his son in the hospital and saw many other children with special needs, his heart changed. He began to see how precious these children were and how desperately they needed love and care. Pastor Lee and his wife began taking these children into their home and caring for them. He added the box to the side of the house so that babies could be placed there anonymously. Otherwise they might have been abandoned in the streets.

When his son was born, Pastor Lee questioned God. That search for understanding and the love for his son and the dozens of other children he has cared for affirmed his faith in God. Previously he owned a produce store. Eventually he studied theology and serves as pastor and father to children and other people who are unwanted.²

An ordinary box with an extraordinary mission. A need and an open imagination. A heart of compassion and an openness to a vision from God. These are the components of ministry.

As we move through this season of Lent seeking God's vision for our ministry, I encourage you to begin looking around our church, your neighborhood, the entire community, and paying attention to the little details of life that you see. Then allow your imagination to run wild. How might God want to see a certain situation changed? What could God do with that lot, that building, that group of people, that challenge in our community? How could God use us to do something exciting and helpful in the area around us? What might God be calling us to do in the next sixty years of our ministry?

The Apostle Paul reminded us in the reading from the Epistle to the Romans that Abraham was an old man with few abilities remaining when God called him to move to the Promised Land and settle there. He and Sarah answered that call in fits and starts to be certain, but eventually they settled

²John M. Glionna, "South Korean Pastor Tends an Unwanted Flock," *Los Angeles Times* (June 19, 2011); available online at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/19/world/la-fg-south-korea-orphans-20110620>.

and did as God asked. Through them the nation of Israel grew and out of their lineage the child Jesus came to be the Savior of the world.

In the coming days and weeks, indeed every day of life, let us use our imaginations to discover the ways in which God can use common things to accomplish uncommon tasks. There might yet be a few water jugs or drop boxes out there waiting to be discovered. Who knows, some of us ordinary folks might just be a part of an extraordinary plan.

March 1, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this season when our spiritual focus is turned inward, O God, we become uneasy with the realization that you see us as we really are and know us completely. Our actions and opinions are often short-sighted because they grow out of regret for the past, a need to control the present, or fear of the future. Where our perspective is limited or we lack clarity about decisions or purpose, we often fail to put our complete trust in you.

But we have the assurance that you are our Creator who discerns our thoughts and the deepest longings of our hearts. You number the hairs upon our heads and often meet our needs before we are even aware of them. You share our joys and know the dark places of our lives that we would rather hide from you. We are grateful, O God, that you comprehend all that we do and all that we are, and yet, you do not give us what we deserve but share with us out of the abundance of your blessings. You know our hearts, and even still, you bestow compassion instead of condemnation. For every expression of your grace and every good gift which comes from you, we offer our thanks and praise.

We know, O God, that in spite of our limitations of resolve and resources, you have entrusted the care for this world and for one another into our hands, promising that you will supply our needs. Help us to see all the ways that you are at work in our world, especially in the small broken things, in the meek and poor, in the vulnerable places where we would not think to look for you. Open our eyes to see beauty in unexpected places and everyday encounters because our busy schedules and myopic agendas often prevent us from recognizing the wonder and delight that are all around us.

Grant us the vision in this season of Lent and beyond to look deeply at our own lives while seeing the rest of your children through your eyes of compassion. Teach us to look at those whom we might judge or about whom we make assumptions because of differences in language or creed or custom or opinion as your beloved children and the neighbors we are called to serve. Help us to recognize in every face we see, every circumstance we encounter, every possibility that is ours, your Spirit which is at work, empowering and transforming us and all of creation.

In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection have given us a vision of joyful and abundant life now and eternal life with you, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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