

Texts: Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

We tend to use the word “miracle” a lot. Especially when we talk about technology or medicine. But we’ve tamed down the meaning of the word. Miracles used to have the connotation of the supernatural. Things that took place “above” or “beyond” natural occurrences. Miracles were things of wonder. They were understood to be God’s doing. Nowadays, though, when we talk about miracles, we tend to explain them as the effect of modern technology. Technology does accomplish what might seem to be miraculous. Think of the ways that communication has changed in the last 20 years. The fax machine, for example. Who even sends faxes any more? Now we can text and Skype and Snapchat to stay in touch. But I remember when sending a fax, sending a document over the phone line, seemed like a miracle.

We also talk about miracles of healing, some of us may even have experienced them. Think of what doctors can do. Organ transplants. Chemotherapy. New AIDS and cancer treatments have extended life expectancies far beyond what they used to be. We hear about people having near-death experiences, hovering over the operating table, going to the light and then coming back.

When we talk about miracles, we tend to mean less about what God does, and more about what we human beings can do.

But changing water into wine? This one continues to elude our easy explanations. It sounds a lot more like a magic trick.

John wrote this gospel, he tells us at the end of chapter 20, so that “you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John doesn’t use the word “miracle” anywhere in his Gospel. He calls these acts of Jesus “signs.” “Signs” that we can recognize. Just like a billboard on the side of the road, these signs are meant to announce something. They are meant to reveal Jesus as the Son of God.

As signs go, this one, changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana, seems to be an odd one. In all the other gospels, Jesus first miracles are to cast out demons and to heal the sick. Here, in John’s gospel, Jesus’ first sign takes place to solve an embarrassing situation at a wedding. Jesus, who is the very Word of God, starts small in John’s gospel. Jesus, who in the beginning created all things, seems reluctant to do anything, actually talks back to his mother when she points out the problem. “My hour has not yet come,” he complains, right before he provides an overflow of the best wine. “This was the first of his signs,” John tells us, and it revealed his glory. But hardly anyone recognizes what has happened. The only witnesses to this miraculous sign are Jesus’ mother, a handful of his disciples, and a group of servants.

Yet as signs go, this one is the first, and it is huge. John wants us to know who this Jesus is. He continues to describe these signs, and they get bigger and bigger as the story continues. Jesus goes on to heal a royal official’s servant. Then he heals a lame man; then he restores sight to a man who was born blind. Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He walks on the

sea. He raises Lazarus from the dead. And his final and most dramatic sign is his own death and resurrection. Seventeen chapters later in John's gospel, Jesus' hour has finally come. But as he hangs dying on a Roman cross, just like at the beginning, hardly anyone recognizes what is really happening. Jesus, who began his ministry by turning water into fine wine, drinks a final mouthful of sour wine from a sponge and gives up his spirit. In the moment of his death, the moment of his glory, the only witnesses are his mother, a handful of his disciples, and a group of soldiers.

Back at Cana, Jesus' hour may not yet have come, but at the same time, it *is* his hour. Something is lacking. The community gathered at that wedding is in need. The sign, the miracle, is Jesus' gift to those who are gathered around him, whether they are aware of it or not. The bridegroom, who until that moment may have been cursing his bad luck, finds that there is wine for all, and even more. And not just any wine: the best wine.

It's called "Cana-grace." It is overflowing abundance where just a moment before there was nothing. It is food and music and laughter and love. It is an atmosphere of welcome and well-being – what the Old Testament calls "shalom," peace. This is the nature of miracles. You look and you see emptiness. Then you look again, and everything has changed. Whenever there is a need and Jesus is on the scene, resurrection, new life and abundance are right around the corner.

Often in January, as we finish the holidays and celebrate a new year, we make resolutions focusing on self-improvement. We're going to organize the

clutter, eat more fiber, lose weight, quit smoking. I've done it, too: I've signed up for a yoga class and renewed my membership to the PAC. Much of the time, our new year's resolutions tend to focus on what could be better about ourselves, not what we have to offer others. Yet St. Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us, that every single one of us has received gifts from the Holy Spirit, and that each person has a gift to share, a talent to offer. You can't be a Christian by yourself. The gift of God's amazing and abundant grace, the wine of the miracle, the fire and wind of the Holy Spirit – these are not for your private use. God's gifts are given to you for the common good. We are given these gifts so that we can offer them to others.

I know that there have been times, even recent times, in the life of this congregation when you looked around and what you saw looked like emptiness. I've heard many of you talk about that, and the words you use are these: "Used to be." The Sunday School *used to be* full. (If you are still saying that, you have not been here on a Wednesday night.) There *used to be* wedding receptions here. There *used to be* two worship services on Sunday, and an active WELCA circle and a men's Bible study. Folks that *used to be* active have died, or moved, or simply aren't able any longer to do what they *used to be* able to do. It feels as though the wine has run out.

Yet as I look around this morning, as I think about the varieties of gifts that we have been given by the Holy Spirit, I imagine what St. Paul might have written to this community: To one is given the gift of hospitality. To another is given the gift of organization. To one is given the gift of keeping the church building and its

systems in good repair. To another is given the gift of cooking, to another the gift of washing dishes. To one is given the gift of keeping the books, to another the gift of presiding at council meetings. To one is given the gift of teaching, to another the gift of learning, to another the gift of musical talent, to another the gift of listening. To one is given the gift of sewing, to another the gift of telling jokes, to another the gift of athletic ability. To one is given the gift of curiosity, to another the gift of certainty. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit. And the miracle is that God's grace is abundant and full in this community. That's the nature of miracles. You think you see emptiness. And then you look again and Jesus is on the scene, with his gifts of resurrection and new life and abundance.

You cannot be Christians by yourself. When any other member of the body of Christ suffers, that suffering becomes your own. When any other member of the body of Christ rejoices, that joy becomes your own. We have a variety of gifts that we can give. We have a variety of services that we can do for others. This is not human accomplishment. It is the very sign of the Holy Spirit living and active through us. It's Cana-grace: well-being and abundance and overflowing love.

And here's the best part: the party begins right now. Right here in the wine and bread that we are about to share. Christ died and rose from the dead that we might have life in his name. Christ is really and truly here among us. Christ is really and truly present in the gifts we offer to each other and to those around us. We are the witnesses to the miracle. We are the body of Christ.