

Primary Text: John 2.1-11

You've seen the commercials, but can you envision the Gospel reading for today as that commercial?

A wedding feast at Cana: \$5,000.

Stewards to serve all the food and attend to the guests: \$4,000.

Wine enough for all the guests (at least you thought it would be enough): \$3,000.

Six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty to thirty gallons: \$100.

Water to fill the jars to the brim: \$50.

A wedding celebration with Jesus: Priceless.

Weddings today are quite different than weddings of the Middle East in the first century. One difference, probably is the *gifts*. I imagine a goat or a nice handmade jar to hold water would have been a really nice gift thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away from here.

These days, what do you get for the bride and the groom who have everything? The electronic gift registry is usually a safe bet, but many understandably want to offer something more creative – something that the bride and the groom don't have – and perhaps would never guess they needed or even wanted?

I read recently about the magazine *Slate* running a contest for Unidentifiable Wedding Gifts.¹ All sorts of strangely shaped objects that were to be used as...key holders? or to hang on the mantle? or for God knows what!

I probably don't need to over-emphasize that we in America, especially our generation, have trouble with a little something called *materialism*. And weddings often get a bad rap for materialism, but it's not just wedding. In just about every aspect of our lives, we've lost touch with

¹ Referenced in Lawrence Wood's article "Living by the Word" in *The Christian Century – Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully* (Jan. 9, 2007), p.16.

what is *enough*. We've lost touch with what is *necessary* or what we *need* and what is *desired* or what we *want*. Perhaps we've lost touch with the difference between *material gifts* and *spiritual gifts*...

"The new hymn books are here! The new hymn books are here!" I cried out with glee as we looked at the stack of boxes about a month ago when Dean Colprit unloaded them from his UPS truck. We cut through the tape, pulled out a few of the brand new books with their brand new book smell, carried a couple of them to staff meeting and handed them out to browse through them. "You know," I said trying to cover my sarcasm, "this is what we've been waiting for – this is what's going to fix the church!"

If you haven't guessed already, the new red books sitting next to you on the pew or in front of you in the rack are not going to save or even fix the church. They won't unify all Lutherans, let alone all Christians. They are hardly necessary for us to be "church" and maybe, from time to time, they might even *get in the way* of us being "church." But hopefully, they will at least be helpful *material gifts* to remind us of the *gifts of the Spirit*.

In that staff meeting a month ago, it was all in good fun, but we bordered on heresy and idolatry. I think it was Ken & Arbutus started us jokingly looking through the book for the made-up hymn, "A Mighty Hymnal is our God." And (since it was Advent at the time) the rest of us joined in looking for "Prepare the Royal Hymnal" and "Joy to the World, the Hymnbook is come!"

But even the title of this brand new red book at least points us in the direction to the difference between *material gifts* and *spiritual gifts* – ELW or *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. You will notice that it's not called a "hymnal" or a "songbook" even though I've already referred to it as that at least a dozen times. It is a book of *worship*. This *material thing* is intended to be used for a *spiritual purpose*.

But as Christians, we believe it's hard to separate the two. Because we believe it's how God works – by taking something *material* – like flesh, like your hands, like the body of Jesus – and using it, transforming it, breathing into it a *spiritual purpose* – like teaching or healing, like turning an ordinary hymnal into a book of worship, like turning water into wine.

Advent was a time of preparation. Christmas was a time of celebration. And now Epiphany (the *spiritual* time in which we find ourselves) is a time of *sharing the good news*. Epiphany literally means a “revelation” – and we find the same root word for epiphany in verse eleven of our Gospel reading for today. John writes, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and *revealed* (or *made manifest* or *Epiphanied* – if you will) his glory; and the disciples of Jesus had faith in him.”

I wonder if maybe there was a miracle that happens in the story that is even greater than turning water into wine. Because there are lots of stories of magicians from the time of Jesus who could do things like turn water into wine. I wonder if the even greater miracle was that Jesus *revealed spiritual gifts* (the gifts of the Spirit – of God) through material gifts. With *materialism* we worship the *material gifts* intended to remind us of the gifts of God. But in the story Jesus takes *material gifts* – our ordinary water and our ordinary rituals – and uses them to reveal God’s presence.

In the reading from Corinthians for today, Paul talks even more directly about spiritual gifts. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I don’t want you to be uninformed.” Because, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation (there’s our word for *Epiphany* again!)... To each is given the *revelation* of the Spirit for the common good.”

How might we act differently if we looked at every person and everything we encountered as having the potential to reveal the presence of God to us? Would we treat the neighbor who’s struggling to pay their electric bill differently? Would we think differently about our neighbor who struggles with alcoholism? Would we treat the dog who can’t stop barking all night long differently? Would we act differently towards our children or our parents or our spouse when the shine on our relationship with them is no longer there – when it becomes a struggle to see God through them?

Because, I think, this is the most amazing miracle that God reveals on a daily basis. We find ourselves at the bottom of our jar, running out of wine. What’s the bottom of the jar for you? For me, it’s when my “to do” list has no end, no bottom to it...

It's times like these – when we feel like empty vessels, flesh and bones and not much else, when we are most ready to hear the words of Jesus, “Fill the jars with water.” And we ask, *what good is a little water in a jar going to do?* What good is admitting I'm a broken empty vessel if I'm just going to be reminded of my brokenness? What good is ignoring my “to do” list for a day going to do – what good will giving it a Sabbath do if it's just going to be there again tomorrow?

But we try it, we let our empty bodies rest for awhile. We admit our relationships are sometimes broken, saying “I'm sorry” or “I didn't mean for that to happen”...

...and then Jesus says, “Now draw some out.” And we realize that we have been transformed from emptiness to being filled with joy and celebration. Our material gifts have been transformed into spiritual gifts. Our mundane red hymnals – even with their new book smell – turn our hearts toward worship! Our flesh and bones and not much else bodies, have been infused with life and spirit and the presence of God.

Thank God for miracles. Thank God for material gifts. Thank God for empty lives and empty relationships and an empty world. Because that's how God fills our lives with joy and celebration... That's how God brings transformation and new life and gifts of the Spirit. Amen.