

Fill the empty jars with water

John 2:1-11

Today we celebrate Stewardship Sunday, and encourage the congregation to participate in the stewardship campaign for 2010. In 2009, 15 families or individuals participated in the campaign and submitted a pledge. In our current economic times, a pledge may be a burden for some families. I would like to encourage you to participate, but do not wish to add to your financial stresses.

Today's scripture, John 2:1-11, tells the story of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding at Cana. A wedding is an exciting event -- for the bride and groom, for their families, and for their friends and the wider community. Some weddings are planned a couple of years in advance. Last year, I was asked to officiate a wedding that is scheduled for May, 8th 2010 at a fancy hotel in Denver.

Today I would like to focus on three aspects of the wedding at Cana: How could it happen? When did it happen? And what was the purpose of this miracle?

First, the miracles occur when people obey the word of God.

Jesus, with His mother Mary and His new disciples were invited to a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. The scripture gives us no further background about the wedding. How was Jesus related to the hosts? Why were Jesus and his Disciples invited?

The poet Kahill Gibran elaborated on this wedding story in his book, "Jesus the Son of Man." Gibran named the bride of Cana, Rafca, and created a story for her. Listen to the story of "Rafca, the Bride of Cana" from Rafca's own mouth:

This happened before He was known to the people. I was in my mother's garden tending the rose-bushes, when He stopped at our gate.

And He said, "I am thirsty. Will you give me water from your well?" And I ran and brought the silver cup, and filled it with water; and I poured into it a few drops from the jasmine vial. And He drank deep and was pleased. Then He looked into my eyes and said, "My blessing shall be upon you."

When He said that, I felt as it were a gust of wind rushing through my body. And I was no longer shy; and I said, "Sir, I am betrothed to a man of Cana in Galilee. And I shall be married on the fourth day of the coming week. Will you not come to my wedding and grace my marriage with your presence?"

And He answered, "I will come, my child." Mind you, He said, "My child," yet He was but a youth, and I was nearly twenty.

According to the Bible, the mother of Jesus was in some way related to the family. This would explain why Jesus and His disciples were invited. It would also explain why Mary would say to Jesus, "They have no more wine," and expect him to do something about it. Mary knew that her son was capable and trustworthy, and told the servants, "Whatever he says to you, do it."

And so Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the empty jars with water." And the servants filled the jars. Then he said, "Now draw some out, and take it to the man in charge of the feast." And the servants took the wine to the master. When he master of the feast tasted it, the water had turned into wine. That was the miracle that Jesus performed.

Have you ever experienced a miracle in your life? What is a miracle? Do miracles exist in the world? The miracles in the Bible did not act according to natural law, but were supernatural.

I have experienced several miracles in my life. And I have continued to experience them. In some sense, the act of living itself is a series of miracles. The miracles that I have experienced were unexpected life changes.

The following story was not a miracle, but just a funny experience. About fifteen years ago, I drove from Denver to Los Angeles with Sun and Esther to attend my niece's wedding. The drive took us two days. After the first day of driving, we slept somewhere in Utah. On the second day, we drove through Nevada. It was August and the temperature was over 100 degrees, so we decided to stop in Las Vegas for a couple of hours to rest and get out of the sun.

That was the first time I had ever visited Las Vegas. There was nothing to do in Las Vegas but gamble. The three of us decided to spend ten dollars just for fun. I had three dollars and twenty five cents in quarters in my hand, and sat in front of a slot machine. I put one quarter into the machine and pulled down the bar. It was easy to spend two dollars within a few minutes. I had five quarters left in my hand, and five more chances to pull down the bar. I put another quarter into a machine and took a deep breath before I pulled down the bar. As soon as I pulled it down, I heard a noise like a siren and saw flashing lights coming from my machine.

I thought there was something wrong with my machine. I hadn't done anything wrong. I was frightened. Then I saw a flood of quarters dropping out of the slot machine. Soon a manager came over and asked me to sign a piece of paper. I had hit the jack pot. Twelve hundred quarters had dropped out of my machine. I had won three hundred dollars from just one quarter. I used the money for travel expenses on my trip.

As soon as I understood that I had won, I thought, "If only I had put two quarters into the slot machine instead of one." That's the nature of man's greed and it doesn't stop. Greed is the seed of sin.

I told this story to my friend and his wife one day when I visited them in Seattle. My friend's wife loves slot machines. She pulled my sleeve, saying, "Pastor Cho, you must be a lucky man! I have a great idea for a business for us. I will supply the money and you pull down the bar, and we can share the profit." "No," I said. "That's not good idea. You will lose your money. And my faith will be bankrupted."

I will not say, "If you put your pledge card into the box today, you would be blessed and will get more than one hundred times your pledge in return." But I would like to say, "You will be blessed in invisible ways in your life and your pledge will be an investment in God's business." The Lord said to the servants, "Fill the empty jars with water." Then they filled them to the brim. And then Jesus told them, "Now draw some water out and take it to the man in charge of the feast." As they did so, the water turned into wine. The word of Jesus our Lord changes our life when we obey Him. The most wonderful miracle in the world is the change of person and one's life rather than the change of matter. As Kahill Gibran concludes his story, "The spirit of Jesus of Nazareth is the best and the oldest wine."

Second, I see that miracles occur when the jars are empty.

We are living in the worst economy in decades. I read in the newspaper that the city employees of Cheyenne may soon be laid off due to the city's budget problems. If

Cheyenne is our wedding feast, we surely have no more wine for the guests. It is an irony that the worst time for someone can be the best time for someone else. The scripture shows us that Jesus performed his first miracle when there was a desperate shortage of supplies.

Mary Ann Swenson, the former Bishop of the Rocky Mountain Conference, said, “Unless our cups are empty God cannot fill our cups. Make your cups empty and God will refill your cups.”

Forgive me for using my daughter’s story for illustration. My daughter Alice doesn’t like to spend a lot of money on herself. When she was in college and graduate school, she didn’t own a computer and used the school’s computers. She didn’t have a car, and either walked or took a bus. Even after she was married, and earning good money, she and her husband used a laundromat rather than buy a washing machine. Even now, although both she and her husband earn good salaries, she never buys expensive clothes for herself.

A few years ago, she told me that she had paid off her student loan debts. She and her husband purchased a small house and donated a large sum to the wounded soldiers association. She uses her blessing to help others.

Last year, Alice told her mom that her company, which was owned by Microsoft, was being sold to a French company. Alice said, “Mom, there is a chance I will lose my job, but I will be OK since Mark has a good job.”

A month later she called and said, “Mom, I was just recommended to be promoted to Vice President.” It was the worst time for some, but it was the best time for my daughter. Still, she decided not to take her promotion, but rather resign her job to focus on raising her kids.

Some people think, “This is the time to save for myself.” But God wants us to use this time to be empty for ourselves and for others and for God.

After Christmas, Sun and I visited Alice and Mark in Chicago. When we returned home, we learned that we had each gained ten pounds! So we decided to start exercising by walking. Being overweight or obese is the top health problem for Americans today. If we can lose ten pounds, we can reduce our risks of high blood pressure, diabetes, rheumatism, heart disease, and other major illnesses.

The best way to control weight is through diet and exercise. Personally, I made a resolution to fast every Friday, using that time to pray for others and for personal contemplation. Fasting is a way to be empty and to exercise my spirit. If you can add ten dollars a month to your pledge, your life will be changed through spiritual diet and exercise.

Third, God called us and this church to be empty jars for the Kingdom of God. In John 1:43-51, prior to the wedding at Cana, Jesus meets a young man, Nathanael. Nathanael had heard about Jesus from his friend Philip, but was skeptical. After encountering Jesus himself, Nathanael declares, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” And Jesus says, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that...I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

As Jesus said, “You shall see heaven open.” The wedding at Cana was not just an ordinary wedding, but also a wedding of heaven – a turning of the water of life into the wine of heaven. Let’s look at this scripture lesson under the light of the Kingdom of

God. Jesus frequently used the wedding as a metaphor in his teaching about the nature of the coming Kingdom. He compared the Kingdom to a royal marriage. Jesus describes himself as a Bridegroom and His disciples as guests. In another setting, Jesus is the Bridegroom and John the Baptist is the friend or “best man.”

Last year, during a church conference, I mentioned that the church is like a wedding. Worship should be joyful like a wedding celebration, but also reverent like the marriage covenant taking place. Fellowship should be delightful like a wedding reception, with plenty of food. Ministry is a busy and exciting matter, like the act of hosting a wedding, inviting guests among us. Evangelism is honorable work; we are inviting others to God’s blessed banquet.

Remember the heavenly banquet that our Lord invites us to. The ministry of a heavenly wedding should continue in this church. You and I and this church are the jars to be made empty refilled by the grace of God. Fill this empty box with your pledge cards, and you will see the transformation of this church. That is the most wonderful miracle we will experience this year.