

# We Beheld His Glory

D'ESTA LOVE

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**T**his sermon was preached at the Manhattan Church of Christ Sunday morning worship service, February 13, 2011. As University Chaplain at Pepperdine University, I had received several opportunities to preach. Those occasions were at Disciples churches, a Malibu Community Thanksgiving service at the Jewish Synagogue, or university settings. This invitation was my first opportunity to preach at a Church of Christ worship service. On previous occasions I had been very anxious and always ill at ease. But on this Sunday morning, as I stepped into the pulpit, I felt as though I had come home. These were my people and an *a cappella* worship service. I thought to myself, “this is where I belong.” I was seventy years old and it was surely for me an event of a lifetime.

Stuart and I had spent the weekend with the congregation thinking together about marriage, and I thought John 2.1–12 would be a fitting text for the sermon. I began by quoting the passage (NRSV), along with a few excerpts from John’s prologue.

## **The Sermon**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them to the brim. He said to them, “Draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the chief steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (although the servants who drew the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2.1-12)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth... And from his fullness we have received grace upon grace. (John 1.14, 16)

I love Eugene Peterson’s translation of John 1.14, which reads: “And the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” John, in the second chapter of his gospel, tells us a story about life in the neighborhood. Its setting is a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and there is a full cast of characters: Jesus, his mother, his disciples, the servants, the chief steward and the bridegroom. (What an ideal text for a sermon in the midst of a marriage seminar.) There are certainly other characters present or perhaps just offstage—the bride, her attendants, family members and invited guests. But the only one who is identified by name is Jesus. In this story Jesus has center stage.

The story begins with the casual tone you would expect for a tale about life in the neighborhood. “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.” Now, what could be more ordinary than to go to a wedding with your mother? Birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and even funerals punctuate the day-to-day realities of our life in the flesh. While the bride in this story may not think so, this is an ordinary day in the neighborhood. That is, until the wine runs out—and then it is touched with glory.

That’s what happens when God moves into the neighborhood, when he participates in life in the flesh. Now that God has come to us and lived among us and through the Spirit dwells in us, does not God’s presence break into the routine of our ordinary lives, in our neighborhoods, in our homes, in the midst of daily activities, and we see his glory? Does he not touch our stories with glory? Do we not experience his grace in the midst of the routine of our ordinary lives?

Two weeks ago Stuart and I attended the memorial service for our friend, Nancy Hughes, who died after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s. It was a wonderful occasion. We saw many old friends we had not seen in years. It was great to see Nancy’s and Norman’s children and grandchildren. They were just kids when we last saw them and now they are grown men and women. That’s the way life is in the neighborhood, is it not? At the beginning of the service we watched a sweet video of Nancy’s childhood, her years at Harding and her marriage to Norman. But then Joi Carr sang “Soon I will be Done with the Troubles of this World” and an ordinary, flesh and blood occasion was touched with glory. A small singing group sang “Come, O Ye Disconsolate,” each stanza ending with the words “Earth has no sorrow that Heav’n cannot heal.” We were reminded that God was with us. Suddenly, an event that is part of life in the neighborhood was transformed into a sacred event. It was grace upon grace. Water turned to wine.

I could take you to my mother’s neighborhood in Abilene, Texas. She is a widow and lives alone at Christian Village. Every morning she goes about her normal routine. She takes her medicine, walks up and down the hall a few times (getting slower because she uses a walker now) and then dresses for her day. And on Fridays she goes to the beauty shop. It is an all morning affair and a predictable routine. Then one day a knock comes at her door and there stands her twenty-four-year-old great-grandson Joshua with a small teapot in his hands. He has come to make tea for his ninety-year-old great-grandmother. As they drink their tea together they talk about life and faith, and my mother’s day has just been touched with glory. It is grace upon grace, water turned to wine.

If we could go into each other’s neighborhoods we would witness incarnational living that takes us into our bedrooms, kitchens, or family rooms and to our weddings, funerals and celebrations. We would no doubt hear words of kindness spoken and witness embraces of love. Perhaps we would see some of you caring for aging parents or sitting by the bedside of your spouse or reading to your granddaughter. Each of us, in the name of Jesus, mediating God’s grace to one another in our everyday walking around flesh and blood lives, and we see glory. This weekend we have been talking about marriage together. We have affirmed that in our marriages we are participating in the life of God. When we bring saving acts of help to each other’s lives we are bringing righteousness to our relationships. We extend the love of God when we treat each other with mercy and justice, forgive each other and serve one another in the name of Jesus. This is life in the neighborhood when it is lived with God.

In our passage for this morning, did you notice that when the servants took the wine to the chief steward he did not know where it came from? The servants knew, however, because they had filled the water jars at Jesus’ bidding and witnessed the turning of the water to wine. Perhaps John is giving us a subtle message about participating in the life of God. In John 11 when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, he says to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” (v. 40). Like the servants at the wedding, we know! When we experience life in the neighborhood with God we see his glory, we experience grace upon grace, water turned to wine, and we know where it comes from. We know that it is from God.

But let’s return to our story because it holds so much more for us to see. John tells us there were six stone water jars for Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. These are stone jars, not clay pots. The stone does not hold impurities because the water that is placed in the jars is used by the Jews for

purification when they become contaminated by the world. And we must not overlook how large these jars are. Each one holds twenty to thirty gallons. And notice that in the text we are told that the servants filled the jars to the brim. That is a lot of wine, and the chief steward compliments the bridegroom for saving the best until the last. Certainly the abundance of wine suggests the magnitude of God's grace and the good things God has in store for those who believe. "And from his fullness we have received grace upon grace."

John tells us this was the first of Jesus' signs. So let's read the sign and discern its meaning. It contains a subtle but powerful image. Already in John's gospel we have heard statements that anticipate the passion of Jesus—his hour when his glory will be revealed. It is as though John is leaving markers that will help us interpret the sign of water turned to wine.

In the first chapter of John we are taken to another neighborhood. It is Bethany across the Jordan where John the Baptist is with his disciples. When Jesus appears on the scene, John points his disciples' attention to Jesus and declares, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Surely this is a foreshadowing of the cross of Jesus. When we come to our story it is the third day and Jesus is at a wedding in Cana. Scholars differ on the literal meaning of the third day—it could be the third day of the wedding or three days after leaving the region of the Jordan. But if we are reading the sign, the third day contains echoes of the "day of the Lord," the "hour of Jesus," the "day of resurrection." And Jesus, when speaking with his mother, references his hour that has not come. And so, John introduces his readers to an hour that has not yet come but now is. This is time that anticipates the future but is also in the present. The kingdom of heaven is breaking into the reality of flesh and blood and what we see is glory.

We could say that the disciples are living between the times. Between the coming of the Word made flesh and the hour of his glorification—the hour of Jesus when his glory is revealed. Yet breaking into their time—their ordinary walking around flesh and blood lives—they see his glory and believe. And as the gospel unfolds there is a growing anticipation of Jesus' time that is coming, but now is—moments such as this scene in Cana when Jesus' glory is revealed.

So in anticipation of his hour, Jesus turns water into wine. He doesn't use drinking water in clay jugs, but he uses these waters—cleansing waters, and he turns them into wine.

What does this sign mean? It means the old order is passing away and the new is coming. It means that there is a new cleansing agent for the kingdom. It is the blood of Jesus, symbolized by wine—the very wine that we drank this morning in memory of him. And so the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, turns water into wine in anticipation of the wine of the new age that was poured out for us all, when blood and water, life and cleansing for the world, flowed from his riven side.

Our story depicts life in the neighborhood but when lived with God it takes on new meaning. So, you see, we too live between the times. Between the resurrection of Jesus and the heavenly feast for which we wait, where the Lamb is the bridegroom and we, his bride, are invited to come to the table.

But as we wait we see his glory, because we are God's dwelling place on earth and this fellowship of believers assembled here today is our dwelling place. It is a place where we dwell in the divine presence of the Father and the Son, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and bound together by the love of God. Together we go from here into the various neighborhoods of our lives and into the marketplace to touch the lives of others with the glory of God, mediating his grace, turning water into wine.

While we stand and sing, if you would like to experience God's glory through prayer, a prayer team is waiting to receive and share with you the grace of God. Please come as we stand and sing.

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