

Ragged Edges
Preached by
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For reflection: *"To turn water into wine, and what is common into what is holy, is indeed the glory of Christianity."*

Frederick William Robertson

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 36:5-10

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Gospel Reading: John 2:1-11

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 the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn 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.

Sermon: *Ragged Edges*

When I was choosing a seminary, one thing I looked for was a strong Biblical studies department. Not having grown up in the church, I thought intense exposure to Scripture would be a good idea. I chose well—my seminary having great scholars in both Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, who could teach and had also served parishes in various capacities. Their knowledge, their passion, and their expertise left their marks on me.

One professor had an approach to studying texts which remains unique in my experience. With her, we studied the seven letters experts agree St. Paul wrote. We were assigned to write a paper for each letter—the total assignment being "Write down all your questions about the text." If my grades were any indication, I asked good questions. I thought this an excellent form of pedagogy until she handed out the final: a one sentence instruction: "Choose one of your papers and answer your own questions."

That course had lasting impact on the way I read all scripture, because one thing I learned was that the only thing that is smooth and seamless about the Scriptures we have received is the paper they are printed on. They all have ragged edges, apparent gaps in storytelling, internal or external contradictions, whether those be with other scriptures or what we know about history, geology, biology, psychology, medicine or astrophysics, among other things.

Sometimes, because we understand these words to be divinely inspired, without really being sure what

that means; sometimes, because we get the physical book confused with its content and what it means to treat either one with respect; sometimes, because we have been hearing these stories and their interpretations for two or four thousand years; sometimes we smooth any ragged edges or become nervous about asking questions. Sometimes we fill in the gaps with so many cultural anachronisms and assumptions, we can no longer discern the gaps. As we begin to look at some of the ragged edges in today's text, let me reassure us all that any faith and text that has stood the test of time for millennia, as well as the God they reflect, can stand up to a few questions.

Like almost all the texts in Scripture which can be heard in different ways, in different times, in different circumstances, so can this text known as "*The Wedding at Cana.*" This text is often used when preaching about or at weddings, for obvious reasons; it often shows up in the lectionary at the beginning of Lent; and there would be a different emphasis if it were to be read on a day when we shared the Lord's Supper. Those times and contexts become important in interpretation, but because last Sunday, and now this Sunday are none of those occasions, it is an opportunity to look at some of the ragged edges—the gaps in story telling or understanding to see what we might learn.

As we know Mary, the mother of Jesus, Jesus and his disciples were at a wedding. If it mattered to John whose wedding we would have been told.

The first words uttered are Mary's statement that they have run out of wine. We don't know if she was making a simple observation; if she was commenting on the general state of inebriation; or if she was announcing an expectation.

Jesus' response—that it didn't have anything to do with him and besides it wasn't his time yet, suggests he heard Mary's statement as an expectation and that is how history now hears it. But an expectation of what?

Even if Mary were still pondering the words she heard at the manger in Bethlehem; even if she understood that to mean her son was the long-awaited Messiah, there is no associated communal expectation that the Messiah would be a magician or miracle worker. This is in the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has only just called the disciples. There aren't any unusual events yet to suggest one might expect that from this Messiah, if that is indeed what he was—because what he was at that point was an unknown quantity. And, in fairness to Mary, according to all the gospels, until the cross, Mary was just as clueless as all the disciples about what they might expect from Jesus, if not more so.

Then there was Jesus' response. Dare we ask what he was waiting for? He had been baptized, accompanied by a sign from heaven and a deep voice from the sky, so presumably he didn't need to hear another one just yet. His disciples had gathered and they were traveling with him. Exactly what was his time supposed to be?

We don't have a lot of time to wrestle with that question—because almost immediately Jesus seemed to contradict himself and decided to act. He tells the servants fill clay jars with water. Why did the servants not say to him, "Who are you to us? You are not our master to whom we answer?"

Now according to John, those clay jars held twenty to thirty gallons of water each. That is a whole lot of water. How long did that take? It's not like there was running water in the house or a garden hose. And in the time that took, no one noticed they were out of wine? Or that the servants had formed a bucket brigade from the village well? Or that there were no servants available for other work?

Then the servants were instructed to take some of the water to the wine steward—water from the jars for Jewish cleaning rituals. People didn't drink that water. It's not like Jesus told them to fill wine skins with water. Yet, once again, the servants trundle along under the direction of a guest doing things that don't make a lot of sense, apparently without questioning.

The servants knew where the water came from; perhaps the scent of fermented grape accompanied them across the room, so they had a glimmer of what they were taking to the wine steward. Otherwise why didn't they ask why the wine steward would want to drink water? But they didn't ask that either.

As we know, it was outstanding wine, and presumably the party went on. John tells us the servants knew where the water turned wine came from, even if others did not. Do we assume that Mary and the

disciples stood there watching, also without asking any questions – such as "Jesus, I mentioned they were out of wine. What's the point of 150 gallons of water?" The disciples might well have asked the same question or why Jesus was taking over as host, at least with regard to ordering the servants around.

John tidily wraps the story up by telling us this was Jesus' first sign. He doesn't call it a miracle, so we need to be careful about doing that. He said that Jesus' glory was revealed. The revelation of glory always points to God, and from John we get the most divine image of the human Jesus, so that makes a certain amount of sense. Then John tells us that Jesus' disciples believed. What did they believe?

In the gospel of John, there is no "Follow me. I will make you fishers of people story." Their initial recruitment, according to John the gospel writer, was that John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah. It was people who heard John preach who went out and recruited other people to be disciples and brought them to Jesus (and there is a text for an evangelism sermon☺). John tells us Jesus knew things about those brought to him, which in the previous chapter seems compelling for disciples, but John the gospel writer tells us they didn't believe until after the wedding at Cana.

Believed what? He was a charismatic man? He was a nice guy who would help out in a pinch? He could do signs? He was the Messiah? He would go all the way to whatever messianic end they imagined? Believed what?

We are not going to try to answer all those questions today, primarily because that is a task for a Bible study, not a sermon – besides – I hated that final☺. As I have said before, anyone who can write a book in elegant language, a book that stands the test of time and is still being read and wrestled with 2000 years later, would have been a good enough writer to see the rough edges and smooth them out. Yet, John the gospel writer (as well as all the other scriptural authors) did not. Maybe John knew all the answers to the questions I asked, but didn't find them important for the story he was telling.

The answered and unanswered questions both serve to drive us to look for the story John was telling, the Jesus he knew and wanted us to know and what he wanted us to be able to believe about Jesus.

And what do we, disciples now believe because of the sign of turning water into wine at a wedding? At the very least, we need to see someone who had the power and the ministry of opening our eyes to the holy in the common things of life—the ability to discern the glory of God in water, wine, bread, blood, body, Word, fig trees, rocks and mountains. And, at the very least, we owe it to the people who wrote and preserved and handed on these stories to us, not to smooth out the ragged edges and so turn holy Words and mysteries into some common Sunday morning story or cheap magic trick. As we receive these gifts of Scripture, let us understand that the ragged edges are themselves gifts which can lead us to a deeper understanding of the Word and the glory of God.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: We enter into prayer aware of the needs of our world, our nation, our city and our own lives. We know that you know these things before we ask, but you have instructed us to come to you in prayer –so we do –knowing that this faithful and trusting act strengthens our connection with you and our awareness of your presence in the world.

We pray for every place in the world where violence, disease, fear and injustice rob people of the fullness of the life for which your Son came.

We pray for our nation, for our leaders and ourselves – especially in this time when more of us than not have begun to confuse intransigence with strength; where mere inconveniences becomes translated as a major obstacle –at least if it is exercised on our side of the argument; and where when largely powerless people held hostage by such debates and have their lives or livelihoods disrupted by such debates, we are more concerned about placing blame than responding to need. We pray for our nation, for our leaders and ourselves.

And we pray for ourselves Lord, the needs, and illnesses and losses of those among us and those we know – that health professionals might do your son's healing ministry, that wholeness might be restored; that the mourning might be comforted, and joy might be shared...All this we pray in the name of your son...