

## ***Wow! ...And Holy Cow!***

Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-11

One of the problems with scripture, at least for most Presbyterian types, are the stories where people get harshly condemned for doing things that seem decent and sensible. One of those stories involves Noah and his sons.

Right about this time, a few years ago, I was asked to lead worship at Western Seminary and to use the lectionary readings for the day. One of those readings was from Genesis, chapter 9. In the story, Noah, who has planted the world's first vineyard, drinks some of the wine, gets drunk, and, completely naked, falls asleep in his tent. Ham, one of Noah's sons, happens to see this and goes outside to tell his two brothers. What kid wouldn't do that?

“Hey, you guys, guess what I just saw in Dad's tent? Oooh, not a pretty sight.” His brothers put a garment over the backs of their shoulders, back into the tent, and cover up their father, all the while facing away from him, so they wouldn't have to see what their brother, Ham, saw.

When Noah wakes up and discovers what had happened, Ham gets roundly scolded and told that he and his sons are cursed because of this and will always be slaves to his brothers. What's up with that? The poor kid just did what most any kid would do. “Psst, come here, check out the scene in Dad's tent.” Ham gets cursed for what seems a fairly normal, innocent kind of reaction.

Then there's Lot's wife. When fleeing from her home in Sodom, she looks back to see the sulfur and fire raining down on her home and village and gets turned into a pillar of salt. If being curious and looking back is evil, we would have huge mounds of salt all over our highways every time there's a fender bender, because of all the looking back and gawking going on.

Then there's that poor servant who doesn't want to lose his master's money, so he buries it and then returns it to his master when the master returns. His master is furious and has him thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (I'm not sure what “gnashing

of teeth is, but when I was a kid my next door neighbor had a “Nash” automobile and it was kind of an ugly little thing). In any case, this poor servant hadn’t earned interest for his master but he certainly hadn’t been careless or selfish with his master’s money. He seemed to be a decent fellow.

And how about when Jesus, in Luke 9, asks a man to follow him, and the man says, “sure, but first let me bury my dead father,” and another man, when asked the same question by Jesus, says, “Yes, I’ll follow you but first let me go home to say farewell to my family.” **Burying** your father and **saying good-bye** to your family before you leave on a trip seem like decent and reasonable things to do.

But all of these people – Ham, Lot’s wife, the talent-burying servant, and the two who want to make things right with their families, are scolded or punished.

Now these can be disturbing scriptures for Presbyterians because they don’t seem decent and sensible. Presbyterians like to do things “decently and in order,” and our ever-growing Book of Order proves it. We easily latch on to a verse like I Corinthians 14:40 which says, “all things should be done decently and in order.” However, we don’t feel such warm attachment to a verse like Acts 17:6, which talks about some of the early Christians being dragged before the authorities as “people who have been turning the world upside down.”

No, for most Presbyterians, “decently and in order” feels better than “turning the world upside down.” That’s why Presbyterian minister, Bob Reed, who published a little book called *How to Survive Being a Presbyterian*, has his main character, the 300 year old Percy T. Presby, say things like “Presbyterianism is a series of meetings occasionally interrupted by a worship service.” Or, “The national drink of Presbyterian women is decaf coffee.” Or, “Some Presbyterians believe that a jazz band is the Boston Pops.” Or, “Presbyterians are like the snail riding on a turtle screaming whee!”

Now I’ve said all this self-deprecating or Presby-deprecating stuff without reference to our Gospel lesson for today, which is the Wedding at Cana of Galilee in John 2:1-11. There are a number of ways to look at this passage. It is sometimes used in the wedding liturgy to show Christ’s

approval of the institution of marriage: this “holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence in Cana of Galilee.” Sometimes this passage is seen as significant because it is the first recorded miracle or sign given by Jesus. Some interpreters focus in on the relationship between Jesus and his mother; others look for a message in the six stone jars for Jewish purification rites. Seven is the Jewish number of perfection, so why only six jars and what does this say about the imperfection of the Jewish Law and about Jesus and grace.

But I want to do something very **un**Presbyterian – we who have **grape juice** for Communion people. I’m really interested in this water into wine thing that happens here. And here’s why: the passage says there were six stone jars filled to the brim with water, each holding 20 to 30 gallons. I’m not great at math but that water became somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of wine! Wow! Or, as Harry Carrey would have said it, “Holy Cow!”

This is **not** a good passage for Christians who want to make the tee-totaling argument (and I grew up in one of those tee-totaling homes), and it’s also pretty rough on those of us who argue for “decently and in order.” This scene is “out of order” or, at least, “out of control” waiting to happen. Frankly, 180 gallons seems like **unholy** excess more than a sign of grace and hospitality.

Lew Smedes, a fine man and scholar, with ties to West Michigan, died in a home accident just before Christmas in 2002. At the time of his death, he had put most of the finishing touches on his spiritual memoir. One of the last chapters of that memoir he titled, “God and I, Almost Friends.” (I’d like to read you the whole chapter.) Writing some 7 years into his retirement at nearly 80 years old, he says, “God and I are still not friends. What is taking us so long?”

“For one thing, good friends like each other and enjoy doing things with each other... So if God is to be my friend, he must like me, which is just what is hard to believe. For years – most of my life in fact – I have not found it easy to think that God could like me. Love me, yes, no problem; it is much easier to love unlovable people than it is to like unlikable people. To be liked, a person has to be likable and that’s that.

“What is more, friends need to be pretty much of the same status. The rich and famous do not usually make close friends of the poor and unknown. If this is true, it would seem to cross us off God’s list of friends before we’ve even thought about it. If there is anything we Calvinists understand, it is that God is too high and too holy for us to cozy up to as a pal; it is not easy for us to schmooze with the Maker of the Universe.

“I once asked a friend of mine what he would do if he met Jesus coming down the street. He said that he would run over to him, put his arms around his shoulders, and say: “Hi, old buddy, wonderful to see you.” Then he asked me the same question, and I said that I would either fall on my face or run and hide. The Calvinist’s kind of God is the one who appeared to Isaiah from his throne on high and caused the prophet to fall on his face and moan for his sins.”

What’s wonderful about this water-into-wine passage is that I think it **does** say something about Jesus as our **friend**. Remember: John is the Gospel of the “continuing presence” of Christ. He’s the one who tells us that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to us, so that he can abide with us and be in us. “I will not leave you orphaned.” Every story John tells is not of something Jesus once did and never again, but of something he continues to do. What John wants us to see here is not that Jesus one day turned some water in stone jars into wine; he wants us to see that whenever Jesus comes into a person’s life there comes a new quality like turning water into wine, like taking something ordinary and making it extraordinary.

I think for a lot of us, there’s a lot more in us than we allow ourselves to express; there are a lot more dreams and wishes inside that never get expressed or lived out. I think we’re probably more likely to **under** do it than **over** do it. On his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus said, “If these were silent the very stones would shout out.” So, maybe it’s even the case that our **under** living is not just **sad** but **sinful**. It represents a separation or a break from who we are meant to be as children of God.

Our God is a God of abundance. That’s why the situation in Haiti is even more tragic. For decade after decade, the story in Haiti has not been a story of abundance, but a story of scarcity and deprivation. And it is not because God is stingy. Sadly, it has taken an enormous tragedy for the world to begin sharing from the abundance God has provided.

And God's provision is for each one of you as well, whatever your need may be.

180 gallons? Wow! That's a lot! Enough for everyone here and then some. Which is to say, there is enough grace here to meet **our** needs and plenty more.

Thanks be to God. Amen.