

Water Into Wine

Sunday, January 16, 2022 at The First Congregational
Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:6 Now there were set there six waterpots of stone,
according to the manner of purification of the Jews,
containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece.

- Introduction: wash your hands

“Cleanliness is next to godliness” is an old saying that I would hear from time to time during my childhood. All the adults would impress upon us kids the importance of washing our hands regularly, especially before a meal. It’s a good idea as it is good hygiene. Restaurant employees are under orders to wash their hands regularly and especially now in the historic pandemic of Covid 19, washing out hands often is still very valuable in keeping the disease at bay. This was also true in the days of our Lord Jesus, and washing hands was taught and commonly practiced in the days of Jesus, both before and after a meal. This is a significant detail in this, the story of our Lord’s first miracle.

- Set the stage

Now to set the stage, so to speak, we find Jesus and His disciples, along with Mary His mother, present at a wedding in the village of Cana as invited guests; perhaps a relative of some sort. When Mary learns that the party has

run out of wine—a great social embarrassment in those days—she brings the situation to her Son. At first, Jesus tries to back away with a harsh sounding statement: “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.” I’ve been assured that the statement is much more respectful in the original language than it is in the English translation. Mary completely ignores the protests of her son, the eternal Son of God and tells the servants to do as Jesus instructed. I find it somewhat amusing that Jesus is so patient. He is God, having joined humanity, and yet He goes along with His mother’s insistence that He help. Nearby are six waterpots of stone, not for holding wine but for water when the people ceremonially wash their hands after the feast. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars full of water and then take a sample to the master of the feast—the man responsible for seeing that the party goes well. If he had known that the sample came from the water jugs reserved for handwashing, he would have never drunk, but he didn’t know that, though the servants did. By this time the water had turned to wine. Ever the practical man, the master of the feast noted that usually the finest wine is served first, but this wine, served toward the end of the feast, is of superior quality. The wedding feast is saved, and the servants and the disciples, no doubt, remembered this event for the rest of their lives. Now, I’d like you to note that Jesus chose to use not containers reserved for wine, but the stone pots used for the hand-washing ceremony. There is a reason for this.

- Washing your hands was akin to washing your soul

There is a symbolism to washing one's hands. Before and after eating, a servant would take some water and pour it over the hands of people at the feast so that it runs from the fingers down to the wrists because they believed that physical cleanliness and ethical and spiritual cleanliness were neighbors. To have one was to encourage the other. So, in addition to good hygiene, hand washing was an act of worship, asking God for a clean conscience, or acknowledging that God is the source of a clean conscience. For Jesus to use the water jugs for ceremonial cleansing was to inform the people that He, as Messiah, could forgive sins. He was the person who could give someone a clean conscience and so we trust Him for forgiveness to this very day. Often, during the pastoral prayer, we invoke the promise that He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The servants, the disciples and Mary would have recognized this.

Oswald Chambers wrote: "Conscience is that ability within me that attaches itself to the highest standard I know, and then continually reminds me of what that standard demands that I do. It is the eye of the soul which looks out either toward God or toward what we regard as the highest standard."* The conscience is like a lens through which can see what God sees. When Christ forgives our sin, it is like

that lens has been cleaned of all dirt and we can now see clearly again.

- Conclusion

Some sermons are about Scriptures that tell us what to do, but most tells us rather what human nature is like, or what God is like. Today's sermon is in that latter category. It is not so much about what we need to do but to note that Jesus is the One who can heal and forgive sin. The stains and ruin wrought upon the soul He removes, and in a way that no one else can do. He is the giver of the clean conscience. That is just one of many things that Christ can do, and that was the point when He turned the water into wine.

* <https://utmost.org/the-habit-of-keeping-a-clear-conscience/>

Note: remember the old story told by Spurgeon, of the person perpetually sweeping a dirty floor to his cabin that was never clean because it was a dirt floor.