

“Water Into Wine”
Isaiah 55:1-5; 1 Timothy 5:22-25;
John 2:1-11

January 17, 2016
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I entered a store and walked right past a good friend. My mind was somewhere else. I was caught up in what I was thinking. I was unaware of what was going on around me. Maybe you've had that same kind of experience. I sometimes get into my car and start driving to somewhere I need to go and I find myself turning at a place that is wrong for the place I was going because I'm so accustomed to a pattern for my trip home or trip to church. There are those times when my mind seems to get stuck in a habit and I just go on without thinking.

If you've ever been playing catch with someone and your attention wanders, in the midst of that someone might say, “Heads up!” And you know when someone says that, the ball is coming your way. It's a way of saying “Pay attention.” When I get caught up in what I'm doing or thinking, when I'm just following my habits, or when I get distracted, I need those things that invite me to pay attention. I need to hear a “heads up” every now and then.

I was thinking about that in relationship to the scripture today because I'm wondering if perhaps this scripture is not a little bit of a “heads up”, a “pay attention.” And, last week's scripture was the same kind of thing. Jesus comes up out of water and we hear God's voice say, “This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” There is something about that which says, “Pay attention.” There is something that makes it pretty clear that God has some confidence in this guy, Jesus.

What's interesting about this particular story out of John is that Jesus' mother had confidence in him too. So last week we heard about his heavenly Father having confidence and this week we hear about his earthly mother having confidence in him.

It's an interesting story here at the beginning of John. Jesus has been baptized and John has seen the dove come down. We heard that story last week. Jesus has begun to get a few disciples but he hasn't really done anything yet. And here, John gives us this first story about Jesus doing something that I've always wondered about. It feels subtle in some ways. Jesus doesn't go to the middle of town and say, “Now I'm going to turn water into wine and make a big show of it.” In fact, he tries to get out of it. He says, “Mother, what is this to us?”

I don't know if you've ever had someone do this to you, but have you been in a situation where something needs to be done and they turn to someone and say, “Just do what he says.” There's that confidence that can feel like, if you are the one receiving that, it's misplaced. But, it certainly gives you some incentive to do it. Jesus is in that kind of position. And so we have this interesting story.

At this wedding, you've got the guy who has been chosen by the family to keep track of the food and the drink and make sure that it gets to everybody-- the steward. The family has probably brought all the food and drink for the party, the wedding reception. And they ran out of wine. So, the steward goes to the bridegroom and says, “We ran out.” Mary must have overheard or understood what was going on and told Jesus. Jesus finally tells the servants to fill these big jars up with water—20 or 30 gallons. After they do it, he says,

“Take some of that to the head steward.” And all of a sudden, someone brings the steward this cup and he takes a sip and goes, “Wow! that’s great! Why did you hold it back?” Of course, he says it to the bridegroom. And, the bridegroom probably has no clue as to what has gone on. The steward has no clue. That’s always confused me. Why did Jesus do this? It’s almost like a secret. The servants know but they aren’t going to go announcing it because it’s not their place. There are interesting ‘who knew’ questions here: the servants and maybe the disciples. At the end as it says they knew about what he had done and saw that his glory was there.

Who else knew about this? Well, the reader. Us. We are let in on this secret. It’s an interesting thing to do at the beginning. When somebody says, “Hey, I’ve got a secret!” you will pay a little extra attention even if you don’t want to. John’s maybe doing that to us. Hey, I’ve got this secret. I’ve got this thing that you might want to know.

Now, what I always struggle with is why this kind of story. I don’t think what John is suggesting that Jesus is the one that we want to invite to all our parties. I don’t think that’s what this story is about. So, what is it about?

Well, let’s look at some things that he talks about here. One, when the steward tastes it, it’s excellent. So, he’s about doing something that’s excellent. The other thing is that there was much more water turned into wine than would ever be needed so it’s something about incredible generosity or abundance that we might find in who Jesus is. And then if we think about the story that was read from Isaiah, God says you don’t need anything to buy the food or drink, but if you want excellent food and excellent drink, what he is basically saying is listen to God. Listen.

If we go back to the beginning of the Gospel of John, John talked about Jesus being the word. “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God.” Think about how, as he turns water into wine and as we think back to that Isaiah passage, there’s a symbolism here of God giving something excellent and generous that will be the very teachings of God, the work of God among us. Of course, we know in the end that wine became a symbol, not just of the goodness that God can bring, but of the new covenant and the forgiveness that comes through Christ’s death, through his blood. So, there is this symbolism there.

So, what I think John is doing is giving us this heads-up in a subtle, inviting way that we might want to pay attention to Jesus. For me, as I go into a new year, there’s lots to pay attention to and I sometimes struggle with what to pay attention to. Do I pay attention to the incredible nature of what’s going on in the world- the economic, social and political complexities? Do I pay attention to what I can see as right and try to judge the world according to it? Do I pay attention to my group, the one I think has it right, and how I think they are going to show me the way? Do I just try to fit into a group or do I just go with my gut reactions to what is going on? What do I pay attention to as I go into this new year? Do I pay attention to the chaos or the fear? Do I pay attention to the promises of one group or another?

This passage reminds me, invites me, says ‘heads-up’ you might want to pay attention to Jesus. And so as we go into this new year, I see this as an invitation to remember and be re-invited to once again think about how we are paying attention to Jesus and what he is going to teach, and where he’s going to lead and what he’s going to heal and the gift he’s going to give. Amen.