

## Water into Wine & Gifts of the Spirit

John 2:1-11 & 1 Corinthians 12:1-22

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

“Christian use of the Cana story usually has avoided any symbolic references to Dionysus.”<sup>1</sup> This statement in the ELCA’s study resources for today’s gospel immediately made me ask myself - why not? As a biblical scholar, I have long known that in the ancient world, the miracle of changing water into wine was associated with the god Dionysus, and that the worship of Dionysus stands behind not only today’s gospel lesson but also Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. So, let’s connect today’s Scriptures to the ancient worship of Dionysus and see if that helps us apply them to our own lives and communities.

Dionysus was the son of a human mother, Semele, secretly impregnated by the god Zeus. She is tricked by Zeus’ jealous wife, into asking her secret love to reveal his true identity. When Zeus does, Semele is burnt to a crisp by his glory. Zeus manages to rescue her fetus by stitching it into his thigh, from where in due time Dionysus is born, only to be torn apart by Titans at the command of Hera. His grandmother, Rhea, brings him back to life — hence he was called the “twice born” god. Dionysus is brought up the wilderness, discovers how to make wine, and travels the world disguised as a human spreading the knowledge of cultivating vines and winemaking, and having all sorts of adventures.



The worship of Dionysus included four public festivals featuring dramatic re-enactments of his life story, as well as secret rituals called mysteries. One of these festivals occurred during the first cold snap after the winter solstice, early in January, when the god manifested himself in the miracle of water turned to wine. Temple springs would pour forth wine, and water jugs would mysteriously fill up with wine in commemoration of Dionysus’ rebirth, and/or marriage. This miracle was called Epiphany — the visible manifestation or showing forth of the god. In the secret mysteries, rituals involving wine, music and dance for inducing states of spiritual ecstasy in which worshippers believed they were possessed by the god, empowered and liberated from oppressive social constraints.

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<sup>1</sup> Sundays and Seasons: DayResources 01-17-2015, “Images in the Readings”



**[STEP 1]** Today’s gospel lesson involves an incident from the life of Jesus that reads like a comedy where the characters talk past each other. Jesus and his disciples are attending a wedding. His mother takes him aside to inform him, “They have no wine.” Jesus responds, “What concern is that to you and me?” She ignores him, and turns to the servants, saying, “Do whatever he tells you.” Jesus tells the servants to fill the six stone jars with water. This would have taken a while since they had to carry 180 gallons of water from the nearest well or stream. Once the jars were filled to brim, Jesus tells them to draw some out and take it to the head steward — voila, the water has become the finest wine. The gospel writer calls this incident a sign — an event that points beyond itself to some deeper reality or truth.

What would his 1<sup>st</sup> century audiences have heard in this gospel narrative? Judean Christ-followers would have heard echoes of the biblical prophets describing the advent of God’s reign on earth with phrases like:

- On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines (Isaiah 25:6)
- The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it (Amos 9:13)

For them, the abundance of wine at a wedding feast would be a fulfillment of these prophecies, pointing to God’s victorious presence in the community that gathers in Christ’s name.

Greek and Roman Christ-followers would have heard echoes of the story of Dionysus. After all, their people had been worshipping Dionysus for about 1500 years. Some had even participated in the secret mysteries of Dionysian worship. For Greek and Roman Christ-followers Christ’s changing water into wine would have been an affirmation that Jesus — not Dionysus — is the true son of the true God.

All believers of every time, place and ethnic background are equally challenged by the way Christ’s glory is shown forth at Cana. Christ quietly works behind the scenes. It is only the mother of Jesus, the servants who did what Jesus told them, and the disciples who witnessed their actions who know where the wine came from. The bridal party and the guests have no idea. This is how Christ’s glory is revealed — without fanfare, without flashy display, without drawing attention to itself — in the midst of ordinary, everyday events, like a wedding where someone miscalculates how much wine is needed. Christ works quietly, even secretly. Empty vessels are filled with what is available — water — which mysteriously becomes what is needed — wine — to celebrate life.

A familiar sounding story, playing on old familiar concepts, but a new and different set of meanings. New values that turn long established cultural images and expectations upside down. An old familiar tradition becomes a sign that points to new and deeper realities.

**[STEP 2]** The mysteries of Dionysus provide an important context for understanding Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Greek and Roman members of Paul's church brought with them what they had learned previously — religious ecstasy was a sign of being possessed by the god Dionysus, empowering and liberating them from the social constraints under which they lived their ordinary lives. These new Christians made a big deal out of speaking in tongues and other dramatic manifestations of the Spirit, believing themselves possessed by Christ, empowered and free to do whatever they wanted. At the Lord's table some got drunk while others went away hungry. Their worship was a chaotic babble of people speaking in tongues, prophesying, asking questions, all at the same time. Spiritual rivalry, and factions characterized their community.



In this morning's excerpt from 1 Corinthians Paul reminds his readers of three important things about the Holy Spirit and what it offers that are vital to the church.

The first gift of the Spirit is our confession that **Jesus** is Lord, not Dionysus or Caesar in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and certainly not any of the things that clamor for our trust and loyalty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Spirit testifies in every time and place that Christ crucified and resurrected is our Lord and Savior — not money, power, fame, security, self-esteem, paranoia or anything else.

The second gift of the Spirit is unity in diversity — there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit ... varieties of service, but the same Lord ... varieties of activities, but the same God (12:4-6). All of our gifts, ways of serving and activities originate in the one Spirit/Lord/God who is the source of all life and salvation.

The third thing Paul wants his readers to know about spiritual gifts is that the Spirit gives gifts, inspires service, and activates activities in **everyone**. Each person is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the **common good** (12:7). Spiritual gifts, ministries and energies are given to individuals for the good of community. So, when Paul evaluates the relative merits of speaking in tongues with what he calls "prophecy" but today we call "proclamation" his criteria is: does it benefit only the individual doing it? Or does it benefit others? How does it benefit the whole

church? As Mary Hinkle Shore sums up Paul's teaching, "If a gift cannot be shared, and shared for the good of others, it is not from the Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

So.... if we bring Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts together with our gospel lesson what do we get? For me, the story of Christ's changing water into wine is a sign pointing to the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are signs of Christ's presence in our lives and in our church. Just as Christ worked quietly behind the scenes to transform what was on hand (water) into what was needed (wine), the Holy Spirit takes what we have — our talents, skills, time, energy, and resources — quietly transforming them into ministries and activities that benefit others and build up our church.

As we move toward our annual meeting and the next steps in our strategic plan to grow our mission here at St. Stephen's my prayer is that Christ will open our eyes to see not only the signs of his presence in our midst, but the shadow of culturally ingrained values and practices that like the worship of Dionysus in Corinth need to be corrected. May we receive the equivalent of 180 gallons of wisdom and knowledge together with the spiritual gifts that will benefit this church and this neighborhood the most. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, "What is God Up To?" at [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1338](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1338).