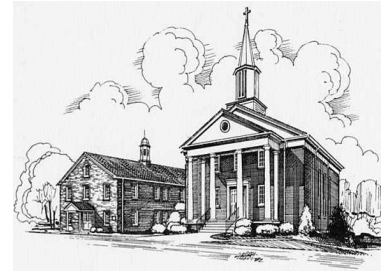


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Second Sunday after the Epiphany**

Year C  
RCL



1 Corinthians 12:1-11  
Psalm 36:5-10  
John 2:1-11

**The Collect**

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Psalm 36:5-10 Page 632, BCP**

*Dixit injustus*

- 5 Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens,  
and your faithfulness to the clouds.
- 6 Your righteousness is like the strong mountains,  
your justice like the great deep;  
you save both man and beast, O LORD.
- 7 How priceless is your love, O God!  
your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.
- 8 They feast upon the abundance of your house;  
you give them drink from the river of your delights.
- 9 For with you is the well of life,  
and in your light we see light.
- 10 Continue your loving-kindness to those who know you,  
and your favor to those who are true of heart.

## **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same

Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

**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

Just curious, but how do you feel about ghosts? I know that's not a fair question. You probably feel differently about ghosts now, in a well-lighted church, than you would later, in a dark cemetery, an owl hooting in the distance and a cold wind blowing at the back of your thin shirt, chilling you to the bone, nameless rustlings in the bushes nearby and a slender moon casting a half-light over the strangely moving shadows...

When we're not frightening ourselves by walking about in dark cemeteries, our minds actually limit what we can perceive by telling us ahead of time what can **be** perceived. Our minds hand us a sort of list of the things that can actually exist in our world, and for most of us ghosts don't make the short list. You may remember the video I showed you some years ago of young people passing a basketball around. The task was to count how

many times the players wearing yellow jerseys touched the ball. Round and round went the basketball and everyone busied themselves counting how many times a yellow jersey touched the ball. The task had defined what could exist within it – players in black or yellow jerseys and a basketball. As you recall, when we later replayed the video, what actually happened was that a man dressed in a gorilla suit walked out in plain sight, paused, then walked off. Nobody saw him because he was not a black jersey, a yellow jersey or a basketball. We see what we expect to see. This is how slight of hand magic works, and if you don't believe me, find somebody on the street with a three-card Monte game and see how quickly your money moves from your pocket to his. We see what we expect to see.

There are lots of things which our minds tell us clearly cannot exist. Ghosts are just one of them. Mira-



cles are another one of those things which generally don't appear on our lists. For most modern people, when the Scriptures recount a miracle, our first impulse is to discount it, although we're never that candid with ourselves about what we're doing. It's all done sub-consciously.

Let me tell you what I mean when I say we discount miracles. One of the ways we do that is to refuse to confront the miracle. We blow it off by saying, "God can do anything". Saying "God can do anything" isn't very informative at all, because we'll sooner or later have to ask if God can create a rock so heavy he can't pick it up. We're really saying that we don't want to have anything to do with things that aren't on our list.

The other thing we're apt to do with accounts of miracles is to try to domesticate them. We try to un-miraculize them so they'll fit on our list. Miracles can't hap-

pen, our common sense tells us, therefore accounts of miracles must be explained away. The miracle is either mass hysteria, or the ancient people were dumber than we are, or it's an out-and-out fabrication by the church. Rule one is, "Miracles can't happen." Rule two is, "In case of a miracle, see rule one."

To take either course is to depart from the Good News and to substitute for it the contents of our lists. We alter a miracle to fit on our list. We do not often alter our lists to include the possibility of miracles, but the very essence of any miracle is that it shatters conventional explanations and expectations. To refuse to permit a miracle to do so is to refuse God entry into our lives! Now, why would we do that?

Truth is, we don't like having our conventional explanations and expectations shattered. It's unnerving and requires us to adjust our list of things which can

happen. This is most uncomfortable. That little list of things that can happen is what we depend upon to make sense of the world. Even if expanding that list will result in our salvation, we're resistant for what we are being saved from is our lists, representing our human limitations. In that sense we all have a little Ebenezer Scrooge in us. The ghost of Christmas past appears and tells Scrooge that he has come for Scrooge's restoration. Scrooge protests that he'd rather have a comfortable night's sleep. That's us. Undomesticated free-range miracles discomfort us. They must be banished for our lists don't permit any such thing, and we're protective of our human limitations.

This reticence about miracles isn't really a modern problem. Ancient people were not more credulous than we are. They had the same investment in an orderly world and much the same list as we have. Indeed, after

Jesus makes wine from water, the immediate reaction of the people there is to do just what I've been accusing us of doing – they try to domesticate the miracle.

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.”

Miracles shatter the boundaries of the world and force us to entertain the possibility that this boundary breaking marks the inbreaking of God. A God that created us and loves us but keeps hands off, functioning only as a celestial score-keeper is one thing. A God who demonstrates the intimacy of our relationship with Him by coming to live among us, even to voluntarily and intentionally taking on the worst we can dish out for our

benefit is something quite different. And, I would suggest, alarming.

If we are not going to take the easy way out, if we are committed to struggling with this text until we receive its blessings, then we must commit to confronting what this miracle says about Jesus. If you read it and intellectually discount it by saying that the ancient people were dumber than you are, or blow it off by saying God can do anything, you're doing yourself a tremendous injustice. You have to wrestle with Scripture, church!

So, how do you feel about miracles, then? You may remember this exchange from "Through the Looking Glass"

"There is no use trying", said Alice; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice", said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes

I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Substitute “what's not on my list” for “impossible things” and you have the flavor of what it is to confront things which confound us. Whatever you (or Lewis Carroll, for that matter) might think about the White Queen, she has said something that strikes me as true. If you wish to connect with God you must do so by permitting your mind to perceive beyond your list of comfortable things. That does, indeed, require practice, for you are actually permitting your little list to be expanded. Following Christ is a path of transformation. It is not a path of confirmation.

Preachers are forever going on about how the Gospel is transformative. Our brothers in the Evangelic churches speak of being “born again”. To take the accounts of the Gospel seriously, to struggle with them

until they give us their blessing is to take a new start, a born again approach, to undergo a transformation. To receive the blessings of the Gospel is to be moved from a perception of God's Creation where water is water, wine is wine, and your own narrow view is the only one you trust, to a view of God's Creation in which you can comfortably trust God Himself. To receive the blessings of the Gospel is to see in the transformation of water to wine, the possibility of transformation of yourself from a frightened and mistrustful servant of your own needs to a faithful and trusting servant of others' needs.

The White Queen tells us that expanding our lists requires practice. Let us begin our practice right here, with this miracle, and let's do it by acknowledging that the fourth Gospel doesn't contain miracles. It contains "Signs". This is the first of seven Signs in John.

The story actually begins with the call of Phillip and

Nathanael as disciples. Jesus found Phillip and said, “Follow me.” Phillip found Nathanael and said, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathanael got all snarky and said, “Nazareth? Really? Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It’s a real dump.”

When Nathanael finally meets Jesus, though, things change dramatically. Nathanael pronounces Jesus the Son of God. At this point Jesus promises Nathanael that he will see greater things yet. The events at the wedding of Cana are the beginning of these “greater things”, the first of the Seven Signs.

If we now view our passage as a Sign instead of a miracle, to what does the Sign point? Our first tip is this exchange between Jesus and his mother:



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.”

The “Greater Things” that Jesus has promised Nathanael, the “Greater Things” to which this first Sign point, are yet in the future. The time has not come. Jesus’ time on earth is predestined, to be real Presbyterian about it. Jesus came for a purpose, and that purpose has a time line that is predetermined.

The second thing to which this first Sign points is to the utter uniqueness of Jesus. His mother tells the servants to do what Jesus says, and Jesus tells them to fill the jars with water which then becomes wine without Jesus touching it. Jesus gives the command. Those following His command do the work. A change is wrought in the world. The changing of the water to wine is called a Sign simply because nobody's list contains a

scenario by which this can happen. You are skewered at the very point of the Sign. Either Jesus is something entirely different, or John made up the whole thing. There's no middle ground as there might have been if Jesus had manipulated the jugs in some way. There's no opportunity for slight of hand. Either you accept what the Evangelist is writing, or you view it as a fraud. Those of us called to faith in Jesus take the first course. Those who are not take the second. To that second group, the first group appears foolish and credulous. Can't be helped. Those are the choices. Jesus is unique, something never before seen, or the Scriptural account is a fraud. This is why I said that simply saying "God can do anything" is a failure to confront the miracle. It fails to confront the yawning gap that exists between those who are called and those who are not.

Let's not get distracted. What we are doing here is

trying to forge a conscious connection to the very Ground of Being. We are trying to go beyond our limited list to make connection with the Absolute, who is similarly trying to connect with us. It is so important a thing to God that He has come among us on a mission that He has undertaken fully from the first. The thing that stands between us and a connection with the Creation and its Creator is our list.

You called me as your pastor, although the polity of the Presbyterian Church prohibits me from being so. Nevertheless, I understand your call to be one to shepherd this congregation. To what am I leading you? I will tell you. I want to draw your eyes down from the heaven you imagine to the glories of the Creation God has arrayed before you. I want to draw your yearning from the comfort of a perfect existence in which there is no pain, no strife, and no unpleasantness to a world of peo-

ple in pain, crying out for your compassion. I want to coax your gaze from your list to an acknowledgment that you live in a world larger than any list you can compile. I want to lead you to a life of perfect submission, the life Jesus showed us, the way of the truth, the light and the life.

Weigh the alternatives carefully, church.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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