

JAN 26, 2025

# *Marion* weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*January 19 sermon— “Better Wine”*

*John 2:1-20, Ephesians 2:11-19*

This week we are looking at some familiar passages. The wedding at Cana, Jesus clearing the Temple, and perhaps a little less familiar Paul’s letter to the Ephesians talking about the unification of Jew and Gentile through Jesus.

There is significance to the placement of these stories in John’s gospel. Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with the birth of Christ. They tell the stories differently but with similar intent. From the beginning of their narrative they want the reader to know that this is about someone of significance. Beyond recording history, they are also communicating theology. The virgin birth was not just telling about the birth of Jesus, it was also a way in the ancient world of communicating that someone was divine. There is, of course, also the kingly language as well. They want whomever hears their writing to know from the get go to pay attention because what is about to be shared is about a divine king.

John I think is similar but different. In chapter 1 he talks about Jesus’ origin but even further back than Matthew or Luke. He goes back to the beginning before time. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things that were created came into being by Him.” This story is about the divine that became flesh. He talks about the baptism and calling the first disciples. John’s gospel uses symbolic language more than the others. Jesus is referred to as “The Lamb or God.” Immediately John foreshadows sacrifice.

The miracle of the wine is more than a story about an incident. John is likely using the wine as a symbol of covenant. Jesus Himself uses the illustration when He talks about new wine in old wine-skins. The wine that was at first was good, but it expired. The wine that Jesus brings is the best you could hope for.

The cleansing of the temple occurs at the beginning of John’s gospel but the end of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are more specific in their chronology and this action kicks off holy week, likely putting Jesus on the map as a potential dissident before Rome. Here in John it is a foreshadowing. The God made flesh, coming to gain disciples and be a “Lamb of God” offers a new covenant and will be at odds with the present work of a corrupt temple that will lead to His demise. “Zeal for my Father’s house will be My undoing.”

This ordering of the wine in Cana is telling even beyond covenant. It is an illustration for all of us whenever a crisis moment comes along. Look to Jesus because He has an answer beyond what we might conceive. At the wedding no one knew what to do in the moment except Mary. “Go to my son, do what He tells you to do.” They did and this unexpected move led to not only a solution but a far better one than they could have contrived.

Notice that the solution wasn’t going back to the same place they’d found that original wine. They didn’t go back to the store to see if there was a bunch more they could buy. It wouldn’t have worked most likely, and whatever they may have found would have been subpar compared to what Jesus offered. When there is a problem, when something is past its time or not working, doubling down on the same things over and over again won’t yield the result we want. Even if the solution is a band aid for the moment there is a better way available. When it’s a matter of faith, church, and congregation that way is always found by going back to the basics of Jesus. Go to the One that will show a solution, not just a temporary hold.

An important note of urgency is represented in the tasting of this new wine. Remember that the surprise was how good it was. The later wine was always skunk wine because people were too addled to taste it properly so it didn’t matter. Here the one in charge has his faculties and notices the quality of the wine. At least as I read the story there is a sense that the guests will likely notice as well.

The solution came before the guests were too soused to notice what had happened. There are issues that come about and the ability to successfully sort them out has a window of time. Wait too long and

the one or ones who will need to take the steps to make a change won't be able or may just be too exhausted to do so.

After this miracle Jesus takes a little time with some family and then the story of clearing out the Temple.

What was happening in the Temple? It was a symbol of how the practices and focus of those leading the people in their faith had become corrupted. In this instance, as people came to purchase sacrificial animals, they had to change their local money to money that was accepted there in Jerusalem. There on the Temple grounds, dishonest measures were used to cheat people out of their money and give them less than their due in return for what money they offered to exchange. "The house of God became a den of thieves."

With the spiritual leadership, rules were hammered without fully grasping the intention of those rules. Jesus Himself in Matthew criticizes the leadership that they are paying attention to the intricate details of the Law and neglecting the important aspects like justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

They had thousands of years where opportunity was available to understand that the Law was trying to instill in them a love for one another that resulted in proper treatment of one another. Instead they seemed to have gone the other way and gotten more concerned with the checklist of "dos and don'ts" rather than focusing on the simple duo that Jesus boiled it all down to: "love God and love each other." Is what is happening truly loving? If no don't do it, if yes then do.

Let's be clear about this. Even the call to love can get hijacked. The term "love" can be twisted to mean anything one wishes. Abuse has been couched in terms of "loving someone enough to hurt them 'for their own good'". The Spanish Inquisition was "loving" because they were just trying to save the souls of the non-believer, and if they didn't convert well then the torture they endured might cause God to go easier on them in the afterlife. It's more loving to not help the person in need because after all, I'm teaching them to stand on their own and not look for a handout.

Most anything can be excused as loving if we get creative enough.

This is a call to genuine love. It doesn't count out accountability, however everything is meted out with a balance of compassion, grace, mercy, and kindness. All we do and how we treat and view one another is in light of recognizing that everyone has the same sacred worth and dignity that we do, and that in our own humanity and sinfulness we are no better, more or less deserving, than any other.

All of this is to set up a very real continuation of what we've been considering these last couple weeks. We've talked about seeking God for spiritual guidance and strength to questions and circumstances that we struggle to find a solution for in our own wisdom and power. We've talked about being brutally honest about where we are both gifted and where we are faulty so that we can embrace calling in genuineness and seek transformation in truth.

Here we apply these notions to something that plagued religion in Jesus' day and in many ways is an obstacle in our own time. Paul in Ephesians talks of how the long list of rules has been set aside for a new way in Christ. This way is unifying for every person, everywhere, and everywhen.

It doesn't mean that there aren't expectations. Paul lays them out in his lists of virtues and vices. Jesus lays them out in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps the question is in how we view these expectations, these "rules".

Rules can be guiding and inspiring. They can also be paralyzing. They can unite us in a common effort towards a common goal. They can divide us when they become measures of who is better than whom or who is "in" and who is "out". They can push us away from the Spirit of Christ when they are primarily a basis of accusations and devaluing, not just when applied to another. Just as harmful is when that is their primarily role in the mirror. They can draw us towards God when they are a means of grace for one another in the midst of walking arm in arm towards becoming who God calls us to be.

What is the greater rule in our eyes? "Do AB and C, don't do XYZ"? Or is it "I'll forgive your doing XYZ and love you as we both strive towards A, B, and C"? Is the rule that we break fellowship because we disagree on rule Q, or is it that we celebrate being able to stay in communion and ministry together because we see eye to eye on A through P and R through Z?

The way we attract the broken around us, and the way we hold one another in fellowship and love says a lot about what rules we hold dear. It says a lot about which covenant we follow. Do we follow the old covenant of a Law that became weaponized or do we follow the new covenant of grace that disarms through its ability to see past the surface to the depth of each human soul?

The way of Christ is calling every person who claims to follow Jesus to a transformation in how Christianity as a whole perceives the role of rules. How do we hold in tension the need to have personal and corporate senses of right and wrong, mercy and grace that will allow us to stand alongside the woman caught in adultery, speak with the woman at the well, and see the potential in imperfect, rough and tumble, dishonest people enough to call them to be disciples, and a humility that looks at disagreement with humility that I may not be right about everything?

Faith that is boiled down to just a set of rules to follow or not follow and even passively encourages me to judge those who don't match my list misses the point. It didn't work in Jesus' day. It doesn't work in ours. For Jesus it seems the person mattered above all no matter their status, sin, disability, or need. I think He understood that anything that is out of order in us is far more effectively mended when we are seen in the depths of who we are and working out from there. Starting by hammering faults leads more to hopelessness that discourages rather than the hope that encourages transformation into the image of Jesus.

So I encourage us to take some time to reflect on our own sets of rules. Where do they land? Are they walls that separate us from others or are they guides pointing us towards a Christ that we are inviting other imperfect people to know, embrace, and allow to usher them into a new life through His redeeming grace? One leads to a separation that not only hampers growth within us, it also hampers a peace we all long for. The other brings us together and brings joyful growth to be celebrated and the peace that passes understanding we hear about all the time.

## BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 7

Now that David has brought the ark into Jerusalem, God and David have a bit of an exchange. David has honored the Lord and wants to go further by building a "house" for the ark. Nathan gives him the go ahead but is quickly corrected on his error.

God doesn't want David to build a house for Godself. Later we hear that it's because of the blood David has on his hands. Here this reason is not present. Here it is because God has never been confined. God has been with them inside and outside Israel. They have been in God's presence from Egypt, travelling to Canaan, settling, and now as a nation. Never has God asked for a fancy dwelling place.

The writer recording this during exile, this message is incredibly important. If this message was indeed sent to Nathan and then David it certainly didn't seem to trickle down to the broader population. The understanding of Israel was that God was the God of Israel and that the Temple was God's home. This is a confining understanding. David's statement later on that God "drove out our enemies and their gods" reminds us that while we consider those gods to be nonexistent and of no effect, the ancient Israelites most likely disagreed. They believed that the gods of other nations were real. The language of the Old Testament verifies this as they understood the gods of nations to be battling one another as the nations themselves did battle. God's name being able to be "shamed" among the nations has a sense that there are competing gods over those nations.

For the exiles this tension over "what about God?" would have been quite real. "We are in Babylon, what now?" If God resides in Jerusalem, the Temple has been destroyed, and the people are far from their homeland how can God be present? How can they worship in this foreign land? Simple. God isn't confined to that building. God is a God that can be anywhere, even everywhere. This is reinforced quickly to Nathan as God spells things out.

In a great flip of David's script, God actually indicates a desire to do something for David. If David isn't allowed to build God a house, God is going to build David's "house". House meaning David's dynasty. David's family will always be on the throne of Israel. God will never back away from honoring

his line.

God recounts the past. Where David has come from and God's role in bringing him out of it. God promises the future. God will elevate David's family, secure Israel, and ultimately David's son will not only rule but will build this house for God. The house will be built for "My Name". Once again this is the hopeful sense that God is not confined to the Temple. The Temple will be a symbol of God, built in God's Name, but God Himself will always roam wherever God so chooses.

Unlike Saul, whom God rejected, even those among David's descendants who fall out of line will be punished, though not forsaken. Predictively, perhaps foreshadowing, this is how the exiles are understood to have occurred. Wicked kings led Israel and Judah astray, and the Assyrians and Babylonians were used to hold them to account. Once again, this connects the dots for those reading this in exile.

Pausing here for a moment we are reminded that throughout scripture writers convey multiple things at one time. Here there is a narrative of history, but it is also combined with a theology as well. What incidents does the writer choose to include? How are they included and why? Writers write for an audience, and typically it's not for an audience thousands of years down the line. They write for their contemporaries to add understanding to their present circumstance, questions about God and God's hand in life, where they have been, and how can they faithfully and hopefully get where they are going?

David's response is different than his previous prayers to God. Before they had a more intimate tone. They were brief and seeking simple counsel. Here David is almost over the top in words of praise and length of prayer. The content is straightforward.

"God, you are awesome". This is all throughout the prayer.

"God, you have promised to make your nation and my family great and live forever." This is both rehearsed as an acknowledgement and as a reminder to God at the end.

David honors God's relationship with Israel and pledges to watch over her.

The shift in tone of his prayer makes sense. David is no longer representing himself alone. His words represent all of Israel. His actions and his relationship with God affects all Israel. There is a different expectation. A king is expected to speak with eloquence. He is expected to honor others with a different kind of praise.

Think about the difference between most people's public and private persona. Those in charge of companies, large groups of people, movements, etc. have a very distinct way of addressing crowds. There is a polish that is for the benefit of not just their own image, but also the image of those they represent. In private they may speak very differently, especially around those with whom they are familiar. They don't have to concern with as much image and "front."

At the end of the prayer, there is a tone that is subtle but real, and leads us to a healthy grasp of God's bigness. David is a bit demanding of God. He is calling on God to be sure to make good on these promises for his family. This to the point that he makes the stakes known. "so that your name may be great forever." "Then the people will say..." Just as Moses reminded God that God's name would be shamed among the nations if the Hebrews were brought to ruin (by God) so David is leveraging this sort of sensibility to hold God to God's promise.

This attitude is counter to a lot of what we are taught as modern Christians. We are taught to go to God with expectation, but not demanding. We are taught to have a full humility, and a certain reverence that reigns in emotion before God. We are taught "our place."

The ancient Hebrew sense of prayer is best reflected in the tones of the Psalms. The Psalms cover the entire range of human emotion, even extremely so. There is extreme joy, praise, frustration, sadness, anger, and so on. Yes, there is always a tone of reverence for God, however not to the exclusion of being honest about where the feelings are in the moment the Psalmist writes.

Why? They knew that God is big enough to handle our feelings. At the end of the day, God can handle it and getting it out before God helps us to keep our steadfast faith strong allowing ourselves to walk continuously with God through it all.

Guess what. Today God can still handle our emotions and doubts be they great or small. At least these things are honest. Honesty is a fundamental undergirding of genuine faith that has integrity. If we

can't be fully honest with God, how can we with ourselves and those around us?

David's prayer shows us several things, but perhaps the greatest is pointing us to this truth. Our God is trustworthy in all things, at all times, and all places to handle us with grace and care even as we are guided and held to account to grow continuously towards Christ.