

ISAIAH 62:1-5  
PSALM 36:5-10  
I CORINTHIANS 12:1-11  
JOHN 2:1-11

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
January 16, 2022; Year C

### ***The Good Stuff!***

**As many of you may be aware by now, I come from a family of infamous bootleggers on my mother's side of the family. My late uncle Raymond Parks became a notorious moonshiner, even called the Al Capone of Atlanta, a lightweight, knockoff, version of a mafia boss, subversively operating during the wonderful days of prohibition, eventually becoming one of the founders of NASCAR, winning the first two Daytona 500s as an owner, and eventually, though unfortunately, posthumously enshrined as a member in perpetuity of the NASCAR Hall of Fame located in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was able to attend the festivities, and the whole show was an absolute blast, kicks and giggles. I also had the honor and privilege of officiating uncle Raymond's funeral, another huge event that happened only a few short years ago. The production of moonshine became a family endeavor, almost like an assembly line, a pipeline keeping the good stuff flowing, an entrepreneurial enterprise that seemed to come naturally, normal or second nature, to all the feigning innocence but guilty criminal players involved in the complex operation. To the members of the extended family who had gotten "saved" and thus were now a bit embarrassed, even offended, by the family tradition, to quote from one of my favorite Hank Williams Jr. songs, I forthrightly said in my funeral homily that all the clan should raise a glass of the good stuff to my industrious uncle, in honor of his legacy and memory. Everybody in the family knew exactly what I meant! They all remember that Raymond, at great personal expense, brought the whole clan, including fifteen siblings—there must not have been**

**much to do in the mountains—moving the family out of depression era poverty, relocating them from Dawsonville, Georgia in Appalachia to the safe confines, and I do mean the safety, of Moultrie, Georgia, a small town in the southernmost part of the state, far removed from the law, the revenuers, and out of the line of fire and the threats of the local competition intent on revenge. There is so much more I could tell but I would be getting way off track, something that may have already occurred, that train long having left the station!**

I begin this sermon with a little family background because today is our annual Season after Epiphany visit to Cana of Galilee where Jesus reportedly once turned water into wine. Supposedly, the thing that separated my uncle's hooch, what they called the "recipe" on the hit TV show "The Waltons," was that my uncle was meticulous about quality control. Yes, his was the good stuff! You may remember that one of the problems inherent in most moonshine stills back in the days of prohibition, was the difficulty affording and securing nearly impossible and appropriate parts necessary to maintain a working still. Prohibition created the literal toxic environment, serving as a petri dish, a breeding ground, powering the illegal liquor trade. People are going to drink. Come hell or high water, people are going to get their booze, their alcohol fix. Improvisation was the order of the day, unfortunately including rigging their illicit stills with lead-lined radiators, an improvised metal container the equivalent of duct tape, taken from wrecked or abandoned automobiles, thus lacing the 'shine with lead poisoning. Yes, this caused the demise of many, DRT, dead right there! Raymond's hooch, however, evidently was just better than the rest! If you have seen the series "Moonshiners" on the Discovery Channel, you will recall the obsession and pride that goes into making sure every batch is consistently exquisite, par excellence, the mark of quality control, including the highest alcohol content, a sure and certain sign that this illegal elixir of non-taxable revenue proportions is the very best, reaching the highest standards in the illicit industry, trade secrets

carefully guarded, kept on the downlow. And good hooch ain't cheap. Just ask my supplier in Georgia, who will remain a secret because we tape these services. Frankly, store-bought hooch is really no hooch at all. Now in all honesty, I am a scotch drinker, a scotch drinking snob because I prefer the single malt variety, though I am willing to make the sacrifice and the exception for Johnny Walker blends. One of my axioms for living is that "life is too short for cheap scotch or cheap cigars!" Yes, you can find that somewhere in Third Timothy! I just felt the need to tell that as if anyone might care!

**I was also reminded of one of my favorite stories that Raymond's bodyguard, Ralph "Bad Eye" Shirley, my favorite uncle on my father's side of the family equation would tell. Yes, we were an inbred sort! It was a short dive into the familial gene pool! It seems that there was a party in progress, and suddenly and tragically the booze ran out and there was no Jesus available to make some more. Well, as fate would have it, one old guy named Fat Hardy thought he would do something about the problem and fix it, as we say in the South. Fat Hardy to the rescue! Well, old Fat found some rubbing alcohol and was so dumb, so ignorant and illiterate, feel free to insert your favorite southern stereotypes here, that he benignly mixed the finest concoction of what amounted to a venomous version of bathtub gin, as all bad prohibitionist elixirs were called, and gave it to the excitedly anticipatory assemblage gathered in mass for the fun and frivolity. Many died from the poisoning. What an idiot! How stupid can you be? Pitiful! Pathetic! To this day the refrain can still be heard echoing in an Atlanta neighborhood once affectionately called "Bellwood, with its "Bellwegians" a not so affectionately moniker labeling its inhabitants, "Don't bring Fat Hardy to the Party!" Believe it or not, this story actually serves a purpose, informing a major point I hope to get across today if I can ever get this "weebing" and wobbling sermon off the ground! People marvel at the miracle at the wedding at Cana because Jesus turned water into wine. I do not know what the big deal is**

**about that miraculous magic trick of turning H2O into vino because I have seen people turn corn squeezings and water into ‘shine whisky, an amazing transformative process. And that, I hope, get’s us off and running today.**

But as I continue this rambling introduction, one more story helps sets the stage for the message I wish to preach and convey to each and every one of you this morning. I grew up in a very traditional, conservative turned fundamentalist Southern Baptist Church where we were threatened with hellfire and brimstone if we did not toe the line and walk the narrow way. My pastor once proudly proclaimed that “it takes a narrow mind to walk a narrow line!” And he was living proof, art imitating life! Part of conservative Baptist lore was the admonition that we were never, under any circumstances, to “use” alcohol as a beverage, whatever that odd terminology meant. I just like to drink the stuff! Yes, the only place that Baptists do not speak to one another is in the liquor store! My late father could and did attest to that fact! My God, my whole family had its roots in booze, illegal and clean, my father managing one of my uncle’s liquor stores after the family went legal. As an aside, after World War II including the happenstance infamy of being at the wrong place at the wrong time as a front and center witness and all hands on deck participant of the attack on Pearl Harbor, my dad’s first job in my uncle’s employe, by the way, was running the very illegal and very first lottery system in Georgia called the “Bug!” Yes, it too was illegal! We were the real-life redneck version of a mafioso family, though us kids did not have a clue until adulthood and the publication of a certain book forcing full disclosure and the resting skeletons to be ushered from their comfortable closets! While attending what was called Church Training on a Sunday evening as a youth, this same pastor decided to do some biblical exegesis in a larger discussion about the dangers of drinking the proverbial demon rum. The thrust of the main point being argued by this pastor went something like this. Since Jesus was really a teetotaler and would have never condoned alcohol in any form, it is clear that the wine he made

had all the alcohol content of Welch's, that's grape juice, by the way. It was a fascinating exegetical adventure with no linguistic knowledge to support his wacko theory, not the slightest hint, not even a modicum, of scholarship to back up such an inane interpretation. Stupid, stupid man! As I said to the assemblage at our gathering in Fellowship Hall the first Sunday after Christmas Day, "the Bible will always tell you what you need to know about a text if you will allow it to do so."

**Jewish weddings were notorious for lasting days on end, and while it would have been the height of embarrassment to run out of wine, no matter how much swill was being guzzled, it was always a distinct and ominously looming possibility creating a nightmarish scenario, a haunting thought of the most egregious magnitude. Besides, what else would you do at a protracted wedding reception? After all, you can only eat so much! Sidebar: some scholars have suggested that the real reason Jesus' mother intervenes and seems in such a panicked and frenetic state, nearly apoplectic with hysteria, as she forcefully stepped into the crisis de jour, doing everything but minding her own business, an unfortunate stereotype describing a typical Jewish mother, though, as we are painfully aware, even the worst stereotypical accusations are sometimes based in, revealing at least a modicum of fact, an outlier echoing a hidden truth. It is assumed by some critics that it was Jesus and his disciples who had drunk more than their fair share and had all become fall down drunk. It was their fault! Pin the tail on their donkey! And so, out of a personal sense of embarrassment and humiliation. Mary, no doubt indignant, felt directly responsible for the host running out of wine. It has also been suggested that Jesus and his entourage were wedding crashers who had not been invited to the festivities, exponentially adding to the crisis at hand. It all sounds reasonable to me, after all Jesus was accused by his oft adversarial Pharisee sparring partners of being a glutton and a drunkard. Read Luke carefully and you will see that Jesus loved to party and was often the life of the party. But he was no**

**Fat Hardy! I told you there was a point to that fun but seemingly irrelevant story. Hey, it's always five o'clock somewhere! And one thing I have discovered about many in this congregation is that you are a drinking sort. I resemble that remark! I am reminded, in the immortal words of a song by Michael McCloud, in his description of the residents of and visitors to Key West, Florida, a place where "drinking is considered a sport!" Are you having fun yet? I know I am! But back to our story.**

**Jesus had just turned six stone jars full of water into wine, jars that interestingly and ironically were used for the Jewish rites of purification, surely having some kind of metaphorical meaning. Well, nothing purifies like alcohol, rubbing or potable, uh, drinkable! John tells us that each jar was filled to the brim, nearly overflowing, giving new meaning to "fill my cup Lord," and we are not talking cups of cold water! Woohoo! Jesus instructed those who watched this amazing show to draw some of the mystery juice out of one of the jars. Offering some of the liquid in question, the questionable liquid, to the steward, yes, the wine steward, the boss of all things vino, the one and only wine connoisseur in the crowd whose job it was to keep the alcohol flowing and who certainly knew the good stuff from the bad, the real from the fake, yes, the alcoholic laden consistency from the bland extract of grape. I can picture the steward even now, after having been given a sample to taste, sniffing the subtle aroma in the rich bouquet as it swirled in the cup, then tenderly taking the politest sip, still surely skeptical that whatever was now in the jars would still amount to nothing more than water. Oh, was he in for a surprise! For not only had the water become wine, transformed and fermented in a nanosecond, in the twinkling of an eye, a fermentation process miraculously speeded up as if on steroids, but it was damn fine, damn good stuff! The steward was no doubt dumbfounded, amazed at what he was drinking. In the immortal words of popular sports commentator Jack Buck, "I don't believe what I just saw" . . . or drank!**

And he sure did not believe what he was tasting! This was no Mogen David, Mad Dog 20/20, no Boone's Farm, Wild Russian Vanya, or any of the so called "Wino wines!" I know, that is probably politically incorrect speak! No, Jesus made the finest vino, whether it be the equivalent to a Cabernet, Merlot, perhaps a Sauvignon Blanc or nice Spanish Red, all right out of the cellar. And to top it all off, to continue our filled to the brim imagery, the steward exclaimed, shouting for all to hear, "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," as if Jesus had just pulled this elixir out of his colon and was somehow hiding this fine vintage somewhere unbeknownst to all present until such a time as this. Besides the steward and the servants who were all on the clock and forced to stay sober, most attendees were all too drunk to know anyway! They would have easily missed this miracle, this miraculous transubstantiation. What the wine steward was acknowledging is that this wine, miraculously manifest in their midst, in the immediacy of the moment, was indeed the good stuff, the very best stuff, the aged, fermented stuff, the most expensive, the costlier varieties that are kept in the cabinet, conveniently hidden from common company, but saved, brought out for the rarest of occasions just like this one, this wedding. The inferior wine was weak, tepid swill, an imitation libation that was almost the equivalent of fruit punch, nothing more than juice of grape, the stuff that was still being stomped into submission by the feet of whoever drew the unlucky straw and was squashing the little fruits as he went to town on them. I have always wondered if they washed their feet before engaging in this ancient practice. The new stuff, the bad stuff, was like KFC's new "miracle" concocted like a laboratory experiment, creating a plant based fake chicken, looks like, tastes like, but, or the Impossible Whopper! Yuck! Where's the beef? Where's the bird, the gospel bird? Cry foul! As Longhorn says, "You can't fake steak!" But I digress; I often do! Yes, just in the nick of time Jesus saved the day, serving up the good stuff, the best, fully fermented, a lovely bouquet

**with an even better taste. That was how Jesus did everything he did. That is the way Jesus rolled! Jesus wants us drinking real wine, the best vintage, not the kind of toxic Kool Aid that seems to pass for Christianity these days.**

**Jesus was the best, is the best, and desires the best for all humanity, every time, all the time! The story of water into wine is an amazing metaphor describing Jesus' hopes and dreams for each and every one of us. It is his longing for the world, including all the world's inhabitants, every person created in the image of God, and for that matter, all creation itself, a creation the Priestly writer of Genesis describes as not just good, but very good. Jesus is the standard, the standard bearer, the gold standard, platinum or palladium, pick your favorite precious metal, setting a very high bar for us to follow, seeking perfection, in the biblical sense, but perhaps allowing us a little wriggle room, to settle for excellence in terms of the way we choose to live our lives as we seek to follow in his very large but graciously loving footsteps, manifest in his merciful and peaceful ways. No, we can never fill Jesus' shoes, but he has given us a worthy goal, along with clear and careful instructions, enabling, even empowering us to find ways to meet the needs of those who are in need, to embolden us to make a difference in our own lives, in the lives of others, as well as in our communities, and yes, invariably in our world. As John Shelby Spong once proclaimed, yes, Jesus wants us to become all we were created to be, to fulfill our potential, to become all we can be, and that means to find ways to "love wastefully" in all our myriad relationships as the human creature. The irony in this text is that in no way is water a bad thing. Jesus even recommends cups of cold water. Water is necessary for our survival! But wine is oh so much better, a sign of the good life, of all there is to celebrate in the living of our days! As an old joke observes, "In a number of carefully controlled trials, scientists have demonstrated that if we drink one liter of water each day, at the end of the year we would**



have absorbed more than one kilo of Escherichia, (E. coli) – bacteria found in feces. In other words, we are consuming one kilo of poop. However, we do NOT run that risk when drinking wine and beer (or tequila, rum, whiskey, or other liquor) because alcohol has to go through a purification process of boiling, filtering or fermenting. Remember: Water + poop, Wine + Health! Therefore, it is better to drink wine and talk stupid, than to drink water and be full of poop (I cleaned up that last part). There is no need to thank me for this valuable information.” Submitted by Bill from Ardmore, Pennsylvania. And of course, it was W. C. Fields who inquired, “Water? Never touch the stuff! Fish (have sex) in it!” Yes, I cleaned that one up as well! I was amazed when I googled alcohol humor and not too much to my surprise discovered the copious, seemingly unlimited, amounts of alcohol themed jokes that came across the screen! But enough frivolity! Stetson Bennett, IV, the winning walk-on quarterback and most valuable offensive player for the National Champion Georgia Bulldogs, was asked what kept him going when he was relegated to the bench as the number five QB on the depth chart, causing him to even humble himself and go and attend Junior College to hone his skills. Bennett always kept his dream alive to play for the team he had loved since childhood, he responded “Bet on yourself!” Bennett never gave up and never gave in on his desire to lead the Bulldog Nation! How proud I am! Wow, what resolve, what incredible insight, advice befitting all of us in our ongoing pursuits as evolutionary creatures. “Bet on yourself!”

**Becoming our best selves is the mark set before us by Jesus, the desire of God for every one of us.**

Switching textual gears for a moment, and yes, we have the right and can do that when we choose, the parable of the judgement toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel, a story that really is not a parable at all, raises the question pondering that which separates, distinguishes, the sheep from the goats, metaphorical animals representing two kinds of human beings, each one unaware as to why these farm animals reside

within the barnyard category that biblically describes them. Frankly, I think that the goats get a very bad rap here! But I digress; I often do! In this mythological analysis, these benignly oblivious goats and sheep go through their lives going about their business, unaware that a record is being maintained, a register meticulously kept and maintained describing every person's actions, specifically in the ways they accidentally or intentionally met, or failed to meet, the needs of their brothers and sisters. Upon their deaths, when they finally meet their maker, the record of their activity is brought to their surprised attention. The question put before them is a simple one, all focused on what they did, or did not do, to the least of these in terms of feeding, clothing, housing, visiting, and quenching a thirsty humanity. Neither goat nor sheep had a clue. They ask as to when was it they saw this mysterious one portrayed in such vulnerably compromised ways? Well, the answer was found in the fact that Jesus was the one revealed in every needy circumstance, indeed masquerading as one individual among a hurting humanity. The answer was located in, resided in however and whomever they encountered and the way or ways they either chose to engage or not engage those whom they randomly, serendipitously, encountered, whether they chose to meet a need or not! It is a quite simple proposition; did they meet the needs of those they met or did they not?

Yes, the emphasis in this story has nothing to do with our belief or our faith, not one concern or care about such, ignoring whether we are saved and have signed on the dotted line, all apparently irrelevant. Whether we have chosen to live the steeple life, all is rendered moot, totally insignificant when measured or weighed against the big picture, what really matters. No, the emphasis is all about, all focused on, what have you done for me lately, have you and how have you responded when a need came before you, came your way, a golden opportunity, a gracious and glorious gift presented from above, uniquely to you and only you in clear and obvious ways. What did you do? Did you do? Did

you stop and turn the water of whatever that need was into the wine of a satisfactory resolution? Folks, social justice should not be, is not that complicated!

This week we are celebrating the life of Martin Luther King, Jr, a man whose name was changed by his father in honor of Martin Luther, the great reformer who in 1517 accidentally started the Protestant Reformation. King was a dreamer, the ultimate dreamer, in a long line of amazing, magnificent, dreamers, dreamers like Joseph of biblical fame. Dreaming people are a bold lot, brave, courageously programmed, having the audacity to dare to ignore the world for what it is, as it is, and creatively visualize the world and its inhabitants as it could be, always seeing the good stuff, the possibility, the potential, imaging the most miraculous of ideas and ideals. Their glass is always at least half full! Thinking about King and the monumental role he performed in bringing about the desperately needed reforms that were a result of the Civil Rights movement, I was reminded of a host of individuals down through the centuries, bold, courageous individuals the writer of the Book of Hebrews calls the “great cloud of witnesses,” who the late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney in a twist on that text called “the balcony people,” those who have gone before us and blazed a trail of glory, making our pathways smoother, our hills like valleys and our valleys like hills, a well-worn path made smooth as we go. They are too numerous to name, though just a few will suffice, including giants in their own right, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther, Sojourner Truth, a myriad of liberationists, and progressive theologians including, John Shelby Spong, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, Amy-Jill Lavine, and Karen Armstrong among a host of others who have helped liberate captive Christians, freeing us all from the confines of any conservative clutches enabling us to wonderfully discover a positively meaningful progressive, postmodern spiritual pathway as they strive to experience the holiness and transcendence that is the mysterious presence we call God. Thank

God the list seems endless, going on and on and on. Sadly, so still is the alternative! And oh, how we need more selfless souls, call it an army, to frighteningly use some military lingo, committed individuals who seek justice and equity, who long for and seek to build an egalitarian society, in this day, a time when ignorance seems to win the order of the day, worn as a badge of honor, oppression and persecution freely but arbitrarily dispensed in its most egregious and subtle of forms. Yes, we need more and more people to sign up and speak out, whose goal is to transform, to turn the water of this world into wine. We are not asking for much! Just to change the world! Yes, sadly society seems to have taken a giant step back, a ginormous leap, becoming meaner and more hostile and reactionary, and far less civil, devoid of common sense and compassion, driven by politics driven by lies and disinformation all doled out to confound and confuse and to galvanize those who seem to not only lack civility, but who seem proud to wallow in their ignorance, basking in their lack of intellectual curiosity, absent the slightest ability to think critically, devoid of the best of human imagination and creative visualization. The gospel offers us the greatest opportunity to be the very antithesis of all that is wrong with our fragile and flawed humanity, to be any and everything unlike many of the vilest, the most wicked and unimaginable dregs of society, malcontents whose warped tales of reality, their perversely twisted stories are graphically told in painstaking detail, the wack-jobs we painfully witness on the nightly news. **The Gospel inspires us to become water into wine, to be water into wine, transformed H<sub>2</sub>O, living metaphors of all that is good, the best of our endeavors to live the life, the gospel life, that we humbly believe we have been called to follow as we seek to honor by mimicking the teachings of Christ Jesus. Yes, it is our turn! This is our time! And it is up to all of us to make the most of it, the very best of it, yes, to make a difference in and with our lives, every small and large effort, infinitesimal and gargantuan, all combined to make sweet wine even when water is always readily available and certainly acceptable on occasion as a viable option!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and who continues to turn our water into wine! Amen and amen!**