

“Real Change”
John 2: 1-25
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What is your religion?

No, I’m not talking about your Christianity compared to Hinduism or Islam.

I’m talking about your own religion.

I realize it’s popular to dislike organized religion and claim instead to have a spirituality.

Okay, whether it is organized or disorganized, what is your spirituality?

Our religion (or our spirituality) is made up of the beliefs and practices by which we fit ourselves into the larger picture of life.

It is our attempt at answering where we came from, why we are here and what happens when we die - the questions of origin, purpose and destiny.

It seems to me that either we continue to ignore those questions all our lives or we settle into some beliefs and practices that help us answer them – our religion.

So, again, what is your religion?

Many of you will respond that you are a Christian.

Then with varying degrees of clarity you will tell me the basic tenets of the Christian faith – We were created by God, who in the person of his Son Jesus, came to earth to die as a sacrifice and substitution for us sinners. He rose again from the dead and offers forgiveness and eternal life to those who follow him.

But I have another question: What does your religion look like?

I've often heard people say, "I'm not a very good Christian."

Well, what does a good one look like; what do they do?

With that question I'm asking how a person's beliefs are fleshed out in actual practice, in conduct.

Now this is where religion or spirituality becomes tricky.

We can begin to substitute the practice for the actual beliefs.

Religious practices substitute for real faith.

Going through religious motions becomes one's religion.

As have some of you, so I have visited many of the Christian shrines in Israel - the Holy Land.

But it's a sad experience to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, for example, beneath which Jesus was supposedly buried.

When you watch what appear to be mindless rituals performed by distracted priests you see no difference from what you experience when you visit a Hindu or Buddhist Temple in the Far East.

The marching, the swaying, the incantations, the candles, the smoke and the rest appear so similar.

In either case what might have once been devotion is so encumbered and encrusted with ritual that it now seems void of anything but meaningless repetition.

Is it any wonder that some kids raised in supposedly Christian homes throw the baby out with the bath water when they study comparative religions?

The rituals of religion all begin to look alike.

Now I want you to consider the religion of many who call themselves Christians.

- They go to church, they get baptized and they take communion.
- They read their Bibles, say their prayers and give some money to charity.

But their kids know that it makes no difference in the way mom and dad live the rest of their lives.

Religious rituals substitute for a real faith.

And the saddest thing of all is that many think the religious practices will count for something with God when life is over.

This is largely what Jesus encountered when he appeared on the scene in the Gospel of John.

In the incidents John tells us about in chapter 2, we will find Jesus offering **a new experience with God** instead of the lifeless rituals of the past.

READ John 2:1-25

To understand the significance of the stories of changing water to wine and clearing the Temple court we have to consider several things.

First of all remember that this Gospel is not a journal.
John is not simply giving us a biography of Jesus.

He stated his purpose in John 20:31 to convince his readers that Jesus is the Christ so that by believing they might have life in his name.

But John later writes, John 21:25 “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

So John selected specific events and conversations from Jesus’ life to accomplish his purpose.

Not only does he select specific events to include but **he then orders them** in a deliberate way – we are talking about the literary structure of his gospel.

John begins chapter 2 in a certain town, Cana of Galilee and a careful reading of the text will demonstrate that he ends this section in that same town.

John 4:46 "Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum."

Other than later in the book when he tells that Nathanael was from Cana, these are the only times Cana is mentioned.

This geographical notation becomes a literary way of putting bookends on this section of his Gospel.

So what is between the bookends?

A wedding in Cana 2:1-12

The clearing of the temple 2:13-25

Conversation with Nicodemus 3:1-21

John the Baptist's Testimony 3:22-36

The woman at the well 4:1-42

A healing from Cana 4:43-54

Each of those stories demonstrates or explains, in some way, the new thing that God is doing through Jesus.

Today we look at just the first two stories because they speak to the same issue: Jesus has come to replace a fossilized religion with new life found only in him.

The story of Jesus changing water into wine is a simple story, quickly told.

Weddings were week-long affairs with as many people invited to participate as the groom's family could afford.

Today, fathers of daughters could only wish that were still the custom.

If the groom's family didn't provide sufficient food and drink it was not only a social disgrace but also potentially a legal problem.

In part because the wedding feast was apparently what made the wedding legal.

Now this story was not recounted by John to teach us about marriage but it is noteworthy that Jesus' first sign was not manifested in some auspicious religious place but at a wedding.

Those who dismiss the importance of marriage today do not take into account Jesus' high praise for such a common but fundamentally important human institution.

I think the Book of Common Prayer in words familiar to many of you states it well, "Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee..."

But John's purpose was not to teach about marriage.

At this wedding, a major faux pas takes place in which the host has not planned sufficient wine – they ran out.

But now again please understand that John also does not present this story in support of alcohol or in support of abstinence.

This is not a story about the blessings or evil of alcohol.

The wine was wine, it was used in many of the celebrations of life but it did not carry the alcoholic content of some of today's artificially distilled wines. In fact it was usually diluted because undiluted wine was considered to be strong drink; it was dangerous and drunkenness was specifically censured (Proverbs

23:20 and Ephesians 5:18). "Methysko" the Greek word translated in the NIV as "too much to drink" does mean at least slightly inebriated.)

But again we go back to our story: Why Mary and Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding is not known but these were small towns, not

that far apart, and one of Jesus' disciples, Nathanael, whom we met in chapter one, was from Cana (21:2).

We can only speculate why Mary got involved but once she was involved she went to her son to do something about the problem.

It is again only speculation to suggest she wanted him to do a miracle – there's no record that Jesus had done a miracle before this.

But at the least, she wanted him to do something; as her eldest son, she knew him to be at least resourceful (see Mark 6:3).

But Jesus responds: 2:4 “Dear woman, why do you involve me?” ...“My time has not yet come.”

This seems a bit harsh to us but not to John's first readers.

They already knew the end of the story, not just this one, but the whole gospel story.

They knew that the word Jesus used to refer to his mother is the same one he would use when he hung on the cross and tenderly implored her to look to one of her other sons to care for her.

Those first readers would also know that when Jesus said “why do you involve me” he was saying because I have a far greater reason for being on earth than helping out a wedding host with more wine, my major concern is different than your concern.

These are the first words from Jesus that his mission on earth is very unique.

When Jesus said, “My time has not yet come,” again, those first readers would know that he was referring to the time of his sacrificial death. (Contrast this with John 12:23 – “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”)

Mary may want his help but Jesus can't afford to let her agenda set his.

At the very least Mary learns that her relationship with her son has changed.

She too must hereafter relate to him as her Messiah as well as her son.

Mary's faith in her son, however, is well expressed by her direction to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you."

The story quickly ends:

Jesus tells the servants to fill some jars with water and then to draw some out of the jars to take to the master of the banquet, the host.

The host tastes it and then tells the groom that this was unusual because the groom had saved the best wine to be served after the inferior wine.

Thus the story ends.

And were it not for the following story, I think we would have a hard time understanding the significance of this one.

But we do have the following story and so before we leave this story, I want you to notice a couple of details that are at least clues as to its significance.

First, John makes a point to tell us the kind of water jars that were setting near by.

John 2:6 "Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

The author specifically notes the purpose of the stone water jars; they are for ceremonial washing – a religious ritual.

Mark 7:3-4 "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles."

But there's another thing to note: These jars that held water for ceremonial cleaning were not to be used for anything else, especially not for wine. (See Keener's footnotes, 510)

They were to be set apart for their special religious usage but Jesus came along and used them for something new.

And by it the author contrasts the old religious system with that new thing that Jesus is doing.

Please see also that the very size of the water jars is noted and the fact that all are filled completely ("to the brim").

150 gallons of wine for a wedding celebration that is nearly over is a lot of wine.

This new thing Jesus is doing is done in abundance.

There is more going on in this story than at first meets the eye.

Before John leaves this story, he adds this commentary: 2:11 "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him."

John calls the miracle a sign; a sign is more than a miracle.

A miracle is a raw display of supernatural power.

A sign is what the miracle points to.

A sign goes beyond a miracle revealing something otherwise hidden.

In this case the sign demonstrates something about Jesus – he is doing things only God can do, it reveals the "glory," something of the very being of God, because Jesus is God.

We've heard this story so many times, but imagine that you are one of those disciples standing there and seeing this happen.

You are standing between the guests and the stone water pots.

You were watching what was happening and you saw water put into those pots.

Then you hear the master of the banquet speak of the quality of the wine that was drawn from those pots and you turn to look at Jesus.

You stare at him, your eyes seeing through the man right into something extraordinary, right into the glory of deity.

Yes, the story displays the raw power of the deity of Jesus but it more than that.

This is a story at two levels.

John presented “The Word” (Jesus Christ) to us in the introduction as the one who created everything that exists.

Here in this first sign, Jesus creates again.

Notice he didn’t even use grapes.

At another level, this Jesus is demonstrating that he has come to do a new thing and much better thing.

He displaces the old religious purification system with something well beyond religion!

I said that it is the next story that gives us assurance that this is John’s purpose in retelling the first story.

Some time later, Jesus went to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem with his disciples.

They went to the Temple.

John 2:14-16 “In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

There were people who came great distances to the Temple for Passover and it was expected that they would not be able to bring the sacrifices with them but would need to buy them when they got there.

The other Gospel writers also indicate that some of the trading was unjust (corrupt) but John doesn't mention that.

Jesus' condemnation did not focus on what was happening but where it was happening – in the temple courts.

The courts were the place for the Gentile converts to Judaism to worship God.

Jesus' concern was that his Father's house was supposed to be a house where God's people met with God and it had been turned into a house of market.

Imagine trying to worship in the midst of cattle, commotion and money changing.

The point is that worship wasn't happening.

Now it was not just that the rituals were fossilized but they had allowed even commerce to crowd up the very purpose of the place.

The commerce like the rituals was part of the religious system.

Theologian A.W. Pink wrote, "Judaism still existed as a religious system (there were purifications and sacrifices) but it ministered no comfort to the heart. It had degenerated into a cold, mechanical routine, utterly destitute of joy in God." (Arthur W. Pink in Boice, 204)

Though I don't think it is John's main point, I think it is worth asking what Jesus would say if he walked into the so-called worship services of even evangelical churches in America today.

It seems that increasingly what is called worship is much more about us than God.

Growing numbers of people think they have worshipped when all they have done is participate in some activity at the church or helped with

some group at the church rather than gathering with God's people to come into the presence of the living God.

Not being baptized and neglecting the Lord's Supper are considered insignificant issues as long as a person is involved in some other activity.

What began as a place to come together to worship our God turned into an activity center that for too many became a substitute for worship.

But is not just that activities replace worship but that even our architecture is more about us than God.

Churches look like shopping malls and sanctuaries look like recreation halls – which they often are.

What draws us into the presence of the holy?

What quiets our mouths and properly diminishes us so that we may see the glory of God?

Have you ever walked into a church where the very architecture draws your eyes up and there is something about the very place that makes chit-chat out of place and makes you want to go to your knees?

And it seems that even our purpose when we gather to worship is more about us than God.

We focus more on being folksy and friendly than on the presence of almighty God.

Even many of the songs in our churches are about us not God.
The whole experience can feel more like a pep rally than the joy-filled holy worship of our God that it can be.

So Jesus drove them out.

One man wrote about Jesus' anger, "It is one of the crowning wickednesses of this age that we have starved and chilled our faculty of indignation." (Ruskin in Morris footnote, 195)

It would be good to have even more discussion of this matter lest we too have displaced true worship with many other things.

But back to our story, the reaction to Jesus' actions was different than I would have expected.

Many Jews expected that the Messiah's coming would be accompanied by the unusual.

So you will notice that the Jewish leaders didn't object so much to what Jesus did as to question his **authority** to do it.

So they are asking, in essence, if he is the Messiah – obviously expecting he is not.

They want him to authenticate himself.

They want a sign. Everyone wants a sign.

So Jesus gives them a sign!

He answers them; "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

What an audacious thing to say! Destroy this temple?

Who would dare to speak such a thing?

This temple was the very center of their nation, their religious life.

And so the religious leaders respond: ²⁰ "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

The word "temple" means the holy place, the sanctuary, the dwelling place of God.

Certainly Jesus knew the people would assume he was talking about the physical stone temple near where they stood, that was still being built.

John tells us that Jesus however was referring to his own body – to his sacrificial death and resurrection.

BUT the comparison to the stone temple is deliberate.

That stone temple would be destroyed not only by the Romans in A.D. 70 but more importantly by it becoming obsolete with Jesus' death and resurrection.

By the time John's Gospel is written his readers would know what this all meant.

Jesus came to replace the old system that at best needed to be fulfilled and at worst needed to be replaced.

As to fulfilling the old system, there were people like John the Baptist who looked forward to the Messiah as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant.

The Old Covenant of Judaism told people what to do but gave them no power to do it but Jesus brought a New Covenant where God would give people a new heart enabled by his Spirit to obey.

The Old Covenant provided only temporary sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins but Jesus brought his own body a sacrifice that would permanently remove our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.

The Old Covenant promised a portion of the earth, a land in Palestine the Jews could call "home" but Jesus brought an inheritance that included the whole earth with God as sovereign King.

Jesus had come to fulfill the old.

But Jesus also came to totally replace the fossilized religion of the religious leaders.

Leon Morris wrote, "There is irony in the fact that ultimately the Jews themselves were to be the means of bringing about the sign they asked the Christ to produce, and which they did not recognize when it came. There is further irony in that to put Jesus to death was to offer the one sacrifice that can truly expiate sin, and thus doom the temple as a place for the offering of sacrifice." (Morris, 199)

Jesus came to offer a wholly new thing.

He came to offer a true worship relationship with the living God.

He came to abundantly provide for his people all the grace they would need to live this life and the one to come.

And that new relationship was not found in the corrupted and fossilized religion of the past but in a relationship with him.

In the water to wine story, Jesus replaces the old depleted stone pot religious system with a new one, offering himself in abundance.

In the clearing of the temple story, Jesus replaces an adulterated religious system with a new one, one built not on the piled stones of an earthly temple but on his own body given and glorified for us.

What is your religion?

Even today religion calcifies and fossilizes so quickly.

We take what ought to be aspects of a living relationship and we turn them into rituals void of meaning even to us.

We then hang on to the form of religion without the power of it.

We relate to a religious system rather than to Jesus.

We hang on to the habits and rituals but lose the person of Jesus.

When Jesus was here, God was doing a new thing in the midst of the religious people but they couldn't accept it because they were so tied to the forms of their religion.

Jesus came to do a new thing for us and in us!

Do you want your old religion or the new?

Jesus, I want my faith to be a relationship with you not simply a set of rituals I perform.

- I don't want to just read a section of the Bible each day; I want to read your Words to me.
- I don't want to just say my prayers; I want to talk to you.

- I don't want to just go to church; I want to worship you in the company of others who wish to do the same.
- I don't want to just do good works; I want to love people as you love them and love them for you.
- I don't want to just obey rules; I want to demonstrate my love for you by obeying you, by doing what you want me to do.
- I don't want to live just for temporary comfort and security; I want to live for your eternal kingdom.

Jesus, today I embrace you!

I choose to trust you!

And I choose to follow you.

You alone have the words of eternal life.

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