

SERMON: Gallons of Grace
TEXT: John 2:1-11

1-16-21

If you pay any attention to local news, you've heard by now that Rex Rust, co-president of Rust communications, died just over a week ago at 52 years of age. I did not know Rex personally. I never met him. But I had certainly heard of him, with First Presbyterian Church being a neighbor right across the street from the Southeast Missourian office. Many of the members at First Pres. have known him for years, have talked well of him, and asked me to put him on our prayer list when we learned that he had pancreatic cancer.

I receive the digital version of the newspaper, so the headlines come to me by email. When I saw the news that Rex had died, I clicked on the tribute, *Farewell to a Brother*, written by Jon Rust, the other half of the co-president team. One of the things from Jon's tribute struck me, and I have been thinking about it ever since. Jon wrote, "More than a decade ago, Rex was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, something most people would never know. He initially kept it quiet, not wanting to be defined by it. But one thing the disease did was draw him closer to Christ. I remember one time talking to him about "tapping into the power of Christ" and he admonished me, saying it wasn't about power.... It's about grace."

Here's a man who was accomplished in academics and sports, graduating with honors, serving as class president, winning awards for football and being named captain of the football, basketball, and baseball teams. He graduated from Harvard University and worked on Wall Street. And he was a community leader in Cape Girardeau, holding a number of positions with civic, community, and professional organizations.

To be sure, you could call Rex Rust a powerful man. So, for him to say that life or his Christian faith or even Christ himself wasn't about power, that's quite remarkable. In fact, he showed his grace by participating in a prison ministry. One friend said that he turned down an invitation to play golf one Saturday because he was visiting the inmates in Charleston.

From the Gospel of John, we heard the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding. This was the first miracle performed by Jesus. And just about everybody I know would like to have that power and would agree that Jesus had his priorities straight. First things first: more wine.

But seriously, folks. It feels a bit trivial to me. Like maybe Jesus was showing off, playing with his power, or trying to be the hero who saves the party from an early death. Though in my mind, his first miracle should be a much more significant and meaningful event. Like feeding five thousand hungry people or giving sight to a blind man or healing a man possessed by demons. But turning water into wine to make the wedding celebration last longer? Really?

The truth is that Jesus wasn't showing off. He was supporting the family in their obligation to show hospitality, which was very important in Biblical times. The family hosting this event would have been terribly humiliated and publicly shamed if the wine ran out too soon. According to one theologian, "That couple would've started their marriage journey badly, they would've been the talk of the town by not providing enough wine, but Jesus literally saved them." (Eliseo

Perez-Alvarez, www.workingpreacher.org, January 17, 2016)

Furthermore, it's really not about the wine. I mean, who needs 180 gallons of wine? Even for a celebration among a whole village of people that goes on for days, this seems like an over-abundance of drink.

In the Gospel of John, what others call miracles, John refers to as *signs*. So Jesus' act of turning water to wine points to something larger than the act itself. These gallons of wine really represent the GALLONS OF GRACE that Jesus has for us and that will be a hallmark of his ministry.

It always seems to trip us up, though, that Jesus spoke to his own mother without much grace. So, let's take a moment to look at this more closely. First, remember the time and the culture – women don't count. Furthermore, if Mary was not offended, then why should we be? She simply turned her focus to the servants and told them, "Do whatever he tells you." Perhaps she was suggesting to Jesus that it *was* time to begin his ministry and this *was* a good place to do that. Perhaps Jesus was suggesting to *her* that it was time to cut the apron strings, and that he now had to answer to a higher power.

Jesus offers GALLONS OF GRACE to us. And not just those of us who are sitting here. Not just those of us who call ourselves Christians. Jesus offers GALLONS OF GRACE to *all of us*. That same theologian pointed out, "In those days food and wine were not served indiscriminately to the guests sitting at the same table. It was based on their social status. Some guests got the cheapest wine

– a mixture of wine, vinegar, and water – like the wine Jesus was offered on the cross (Luke 23:36), while others drank grand reserve. The good news is that Jesus’ wine is for everybody.... Jesus takes the side of the poor groom and bride who ran out of wine in the middle of the fiesta. The Nazarene clinks glasses of wine with folks who are exhausted by poverty, telling them *salud*, cheers, *skol*, meaning salvation, liberation, humanization, healing.” (Eliseo Perez-Alvarez, www.workingpreacher.org,

January 17, 2016)

Every human being is worthy of being treated with grace.

To some people in the world, those jars holding gallons of water are the perfect symbol of grace – not when the water is turned to wine – but when the water is made clean and drinkable by organizations like *Living Waters for the World*. This organization, supported by Westminster, sends teams to remote villages around the world to install filtration systems and to provide health education. Another organization, supported by First Presbyterian, is Marion Medical Mission which was started by the Presbyterian Church in Marion, Illinois. Their focus is on African countries, and they build fresh water wells for remote villages in that part of the world.

To some people, grace comes in the form of a church with its doors open wide and God's people smiling and welcoming, sharing a message of belonging rather than judgment, no matter how you're dressed or who you love.

To some people, grace is a hot shower and warm, safe place to sleep on a cold winter night. And we all know what grace feels like when we are offered a bottle of cold water on a hot summer day.

As we install elders this morning, we are placing them in a position of power. Those serving on the Session have the power to make decisions for the church. And sometimes we know that our decision may not be received well by a portion of the congregation. So we try to be careful to add as much grace as we can to every decision we make. To consider and respect all points of view. Ruling Elders do not rule *over* the congregation from a position of power and authority. Instead, ruling elders are called to *measure* the ministry of the church, to make sure we are abiding by our mission and following in the ways of Jesus in every area of ministry and in every decision we make. To make sure that all we do is done with grace.

When Jesus turned water into wine, it was a powerful act of grace.

GALLONS OF GRACE. As his followers, may we learn from him that we have the power to do miracles, and grace is the greatest miracle of all, the greatest power of all... to the glory of God!

AMEN.