

2nd Sunday after Epiphany – January 20, 2013

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Now we have all done things for the first time – and not been particularly good at it. Sometimes it is the fear of trying something for the first time that is even a barrier. We know we are not going to be good at it so we don't even try. Other times we try and things don't turn out quite the way we wanted them too.

I remember the first time I went skiing. Having grown up in my early years in Los Angeles, let's just say skiing was not a common after school activity. So I was well past college before I ever gave it a try. At the time I was living in the mountainous region of southern Ohio, known as Cincinnati. Now I doubt that many of you have ever taken a ski vacation to Cincinnati. See there is this interesting arrangement of no hills combined with no snow that has never really allowed the ski industry to take off.

But not wanting to miss this opportunity to teach me to ski (or to laugh at me when I fell) my friend Sully suggested we travel to a ski area nearby, in another state, known for its majestic mountains – Indiana. I know, if you are thinking about Indiana right now you are thinking miles of flat farmland. And you would be pretty much right. But somewhere in southern Indiana, nestled along the Ohio River there are a couple of hills and little ski area called “Perfect North.” A perfect spot to begin my quest for Olympic downhill gold.

After driving for about an hour, through a couple of small hills along the Ohio river, but mostly brown, snowless farmland, we finally got to the ski area. We bought our lift tickets and rented our equipment and geared up for the day. It was going so well,

until my skis hit the snow. In less than a second, I was examining the man-made snow up close, with my face planted in a snow bank. My friend was enjoying himself already.

He helped me up and we made our way over to the chair lift. I watched the people in front of us effortlessly glide up to a chair and get swept up the mountain. How hard could this be? I thought to myself. Until my turn came. If you think there was any effortless gliding going on my part, you are sorely wrong. I awkwardly made my way in front of the chair lift, got hit by the chair, and spent another couple minutes examining the snow, up close and personal as the chair passed precariously over my head. And I thought getting down the mountain was going to be the hard part.

When Sully and I finally made it onto the lift, he started gently instructing me on not letting my skis cross, and stopping with a snow plow, and keeping my knees bent, and a thousand other things that I don't remember because I was so scared of the height of the lift, that all I remember being is a dead panic.

My first run down the hill was more of a walk or crawl. Had it not been for the blessing of gravity, I would likely have never made down the mountain. My first time skiing was not a pretty sight as so many firsts often are.

I bring up this idea of firsts, because much has been made of this story that we have in today's Gospel reading, which is the first miracle that is recorded in John's Gospel. Jesus is at a wedding with his mom, they run out of wine, and Jesus turns water into wine. Not a little bit either - a couple hundred gallons of water into wine. For those of you keeping track at home this is between 50 and 75 cases of wine – as much as 900 bottles.

I will not refute the claim that this is the first miracle recorded in John's Gospel, but its worth looking at what the other Gospels say Jesus did first and speculating a bit on why John choose to lead with this story. Our prayer book goes so far as to claim that "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." Yes, it is the first miracle in this Gospel but I don't, however take this as a full on endorsement of marriage – I think that is a bit of a stretch.

Now, remember, this Gospel that we are talking about is the fourth one. Written two or three decades after the others. John, no doubt, had read the others and seen the stories they told. In all three of the other Gospels, Jesus' first miracle is some kind of healing. Whether it's curing every disease and sickness in Matthew, or removing an unclean spirit in Mark and Luke, there is no mention of any wedding, like the one we have here in John's Gospel.

So John is writing this story years later and feels compelled to share this story with us. He feels compelled to show something about Jesus that his early followers in that first century needed to know. He feels compelled to share something that we need to know today.

As I look at it, those first miracles in Matthew, Mark and Luke came to specific individuals. There were people with diseases, there were people with unclean spirits. They were obviously broken and obviously needy. Those miracles – those healings – were amazing.

But there is something different in this message about the wine.

And I'll make three points:

One – there was a lot of it. We are in this season of Epiphany where we are hearing stories that shed light on the divinity of Christ. If Jesus had taken a nice little Poland springs bottle and turned it into a rich cabernet would have been miracle enough. But Jesus goes all in on this one. Even if it was a big wedding celebration, this would have been more than enough.

What that tells us is that God's love, the miracles that can happen in our life, are beyond abundant. There is more than enough to go around. There is more of God's love than you will ever need. This was important to the church in the first century, because people were being persecuted for their beliefs. This is important to people in the 21st century because people are spiritual and not religious. You know what, some organized religions may not be the best way for some people to see and know God, but it is a wonderful gateway for others. What this story shows is that there is more than enough of God's Grace for everyone to share.

And that leads directly to the second point – this miracle is for everyone. Certainly everyone at the party, but there was even more than enough to take home. But, like I said, in the other Gospels the first miracle was for some specific individual. This one benefited everyone at the party. The message to the early church was that Jesus was for everyone – Gentile and Jew. Jesus' gifts were not to some exclusive club. It is the same important message for today. Everyone is welcome and invited into this place. Everyone is welcome to share. It's a good message for this Martin Luther King weekend, where we celebrate the strides that we have made toward radical inclusion. There is still work to be

done, but this story says that Jesus is the gateway and not the barrier.

The third point is that what Jesus has to offer is the best. Remember back to the story. If he had turned 180 gallons of water into two-buck chuck, or some other cheap wine – that would have been pretty darn cool. An amazing miracle. But Jesus turns this water into the best wine. The message yesterday and today, is that Jesus exceeds and over delivers.

So if this was Jesus' first miracle in John's Gospel. I think he did a little better than I did on my first time on a ski slope. What we are shown in this story is abundance, inclusion and quality. That is what we get with Jesus. That is what we get from Jesus. The question it begs for us is what do we need to do now – for the first time – knowing that this is the strength that is behind us in all we do. God is constantly calling us to firsts. Things we don't think we can do, and may not do well at first.

But, with what Jesus is showing us in this story we are compelled to try – knowing that the power of God's love is with us all the way.