

***“What’s God Up to Oliver Stewart and Trinity?”***

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Sunday, January 17, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 62: 1–5; Psalm 36: 5–10;  
1 Corinthians 12: 1–11; John 2: 1–11

What’s God up to Oliver Stewart and Trinity?

On August 13, 1989 I stood before you for the first time. I was here to preach my call sermon though I actually took the opportunity to preach twice. Once to the children, and once to the adults. Some of you may remember this stone. I used it to tell the children the story of stone soup.

A battle weary soldier arrived in a town where food was scarce and everyone was hungry. The soldier settled down in the middle of the town and began boiling his stone. It wasn’t long before children turned up to check the soldier out and see what he was doing. They were eager to know what this stranger was up to.

That was not at all unlike what is happening in this morning’s gospel. Here we have the only account of Jesus at a wedding or, more properly put, at the banquet following a wedding.

Unfortunately for the host, the wine runs out and Jesus’ mother asks Him to take care of the problem. She then instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus’ tells them. Protesting to her about the impropriety and untimeliness of the request, Jesus orders the servants to get six stone jars each holding between twenty and thirty gallons and fill them with water.

We are all so familiar with the story but do we actually grasp what it is that God is up to in this banquet crisis. This wine Jesus provides is not just a few bottles more for the rest of the celebration. It is a vast quantity, something like 120 to 180 gallons, enough for a lifetime. Just what is God up to?

More pointedly for us, what is God up to in my retiring? Both you and I have some anxiety about the end of a wonderful partnership. For me, the reality hit home in staff meeting this week. As a routine part of the meeting we check our date books against the calendar. When it came to Monday 18<sup>th</sup> I tuned the page and the week following was EMPTY! Which set me to wondering who will I be? Not what will I do? My dear, beloved Barbara has a list, a very comprehensive list; there is no question about what I will be doing.

And for you, the question is what will the future be like for you and for Oliver Stewart? You see, our focus needs to be firmly placed on the future and rightly so. We can view the past with its failures, errors and accomplishments which serve to enrich our understanding and provide a firm foundation for our journey into a future that is ours to live and God’s to own.

When I preached to the adults on August 13, 1989, I used the metaphor of running a marathon. The imagery was a perfect fit for the scripture of the day and the occasion of you deciding whether or not to take the risk and call me as your senior pastor. What a marathon it has been and what great accomplishments we have achieved along the way, as a community of faith.

That success is due not just to the efforts of one person but to the combined efforts of us all.

We have truly run the course together with one another and firmly followed in the footsteps of Christ Himself. Without Him, without the word of God, without baptism and Holy Communion we could not even have begun to run the race that was before us. There were times, were there not, when for whatever reason we thought the whole thing was in jeopardy and the race lost.

But there is the peculiar truth about being a community of faith because even though the race was at times difficult, at times seemingly lost, the end was, is, and will always be in the victory already won for us in Christ.

That was the point, was it not, in the children's sermon about stone soup? The soldier and the stone were, to all intents and purposes, Christ revealed in the word of God. The children were the first to respond. The soldier placed and his stone in the great pot of water which set about bubbling with the promise of food for all. At the soldier's invitation, the children scouted around for the odd potato, leek, carrot and vegetable and brought them for the soldier to add to the broth.

In no time word spread and the adults of the village brought what they had to offer from their meager supplies. They added what they brought to the soldiers pot as it boiled and bubbled the ever richer sustenance it had to offer all.

Just so Jesus at the wedding feast that ran out of wine. Quietly instructing the servants to fill the jars with water and then asking the servants to take a sample to the steward. An odd request, but the servants obeyed. When the steward raised the sample to his lips and tasted he was stunned. Never had there been such fine wine and never in such a vast quantity. The bridegroom's reputation was secure, and the celebration so great it has been remembered down through the murky passage of time.

Therein is to be found the heart of the gospel story which points to the unimaginable generosity of God shown to us in Jesus. The gifts that God showers on us in and through Jesus go way beyond meeting the needs of the moment. They encompass, as the story reveals, the celebration of life itself. Their sheer abundance extends far beyond what any community of faith can ask, or imagine, or comprehend. So this sign stands as one of transformation and Jesus is the agent. So is revealed the process of grace going from an emptiness through water to a newness.

Which, of course, is exactly what has happened with and to Oliver Stewart in his baptism.

It is, if you will, a rebirth into a new community, an adoption as a child of God and a new member of the community of faith.

Just so it is for each of us, a spiritual transformation in which we reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. The shape of our personalities may appear unchanged and the remains of a "crushed grape" residue of unfinished business may still be there, but in the depths the old former self is no more and there is a completely new awareness. What greater transformation than this: reborn as daughters and sons of God. Daughters and sons who are promised the varieties of spiritual gifts, which will make possible even more far-reaching change.

And therein lies the secret of a rebirth that is beginning for Trinity as I speak. For this is not an ending. God doesn't deal in endings. God is always about new beginnings. Which, of course is what the wedding at Cana was all about. The beginning of a new family blessed by God and ready to step into a new and challenging future with God. It is also what we are about here, today. The old wine, if you will, has done its work and the new wine is already being poured out.

What better way to celebrate than a banquet, the first course of which awaits us at this table. The bread of life, the wine of forgiveness. Little wonder that throughout scripture the banquet is a symbol of a new time, a new age, and a promise that when Messiah returns He will come and set the table for the feast. Fresh from His baptism, from being tempted and from gathering disciples, Jesus announces by turning water into wonderful wine that His coming into the world begins a new age with new possibilities for new life.

There will be cynics who will say it has not and will not happen and that Jesus is not the one they look for. For, you see, the newness, the celebration, the startling proclamation that humankind can live in a new kind of relationship with God, scares sane people. But, we have tasted the wine that once was water. We remember the promise at the table on the Lord's day, where we dine on the sacred food that keeps hope and faith alive. A place is set for us at the banquet. We, you, I, and Oliver Stewart have accepted the special invitation, and we are a new people. Thanks be to God.

So I take my leave and this strange old stone goes with me. But Pastor Ludwig is here and he will make great soup with you. There is really no break in the story of Trinity. Just a growing succession of Pastors who come to carry on the mission and ministry of this wonderful congregation.

If I may I want to leave you a parting gift. It is this coronation stole woven with all the liturgical colors so that it may be worn by a pastor on any occasion the pastor wishes. It was given to me a few years back by Elizabeth Winters. It was Matt Winter's stole. He was the Pastor who led Trinity out of the old church on Market Street and into this wonderful church here. It is an honor to wear it and a greater honor to give it to Trinity that other pastors in their turn may wear it from time to time as they so choose. It bears witness to the presence of Christ in the past, present, and future of this blessed community of faith. Amen.

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