

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 19, 2014  
Sermon Title: "Newsies" For Now: In Praise of Change  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: John 2:1-11

## **John 2:1-11**

### **The Wedding at Cana**

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, '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.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

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CHANGE: sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't. A few months ago, when we had just started our new Bible discussion series, "Biblical Literacy," I started concentrating on the people and stories that we all should know to be Biblically literate. Somehow or other, that got me to thinking: if we were going to write the Bible over again, if we were going to update it, what would we add? The Bible ends at about 100 A.D., with the Book of Revelation. In the first century, Christianity literally closed the book on the Bible. They decided what got in, what didn't. Nothing new since then. So I

started thinking: if the bible is a history of God at work in the world, a history of God's thinking, God's ideas, God's movements, God's will, aren't there people and places and things worth adding? Very quickly, I came up with Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. That was within seconds, just a gut-level, top-of-the-head response to some folks whose grasp of faith and God and religion seem Biblical with a capital B, worth remembering ... forever.

And then, all of a sudden, Nelson Mandela dies, it's the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday weekend, and our Adult Ed Committee just showed the film "Bonhoeffer." It all came together. All people for whom change was a good thing. Change was urgent, vital, necessary, even Godly ... and completely at one with their faith. Change is not always easy, not always popular, not always welcome. And sometimes change just is. We may not know if it is good or bad. It just is.

The other day I was talking with some of our college kids, they were saying most of their friends don't even have TVs. Oh, they watch plenty of TV shows, but not on TV. They'll watch on a computer screen or an iPad or an iPhone. They won't sit down on a Tuesday night at 10 and watch "Person of Interest" in their favorite chair. Instead, they curl up on a couch or a bed, late night, mid-afternoon, or on a weekend, and watch three or four episodes back to back. *The New York Times* reported on something they called "syncing," where two people in love, separated by miles, even continents, will arrange to Skype each other, and while being thousands of miles apart, they'll do a countdown, 5-4-3-2-1, and presto! They'll click a button on their iPads and watch the same show together, while watching each other by Skype, watching the same show by iPad!

That's "change" on a hundred levels: change in viewing habits and leisure habits, change in relationships, change in production, change in how we see and listen and experience; change, I'm sure, in how we act, direct, produce; change in marketing, change in the experience itself.

Change comes to everyone, everything. My Bible stories today are all about wine. And wine is change. Wine isn't natural. I love it, red and Italian, but it isn't natural. Wine begins as a grape. Leave a grape alone long enough, it becomes a raisin, not wine. Wine has to be converted. I chose that word on purpose because "conversion" is a controversial term nowadays.

There's a kid in India I've helped a lot. He's on Facebook, and on his Facebook page he posted a very anti-conversion screed, primarily an anti-Christian conversion screed. He seems to think Christians are interested in conversion. He's right! He seems to think conversion is a bad thing. He's

wrong. Conversion means "change." The opposite of change is "stagnation." If you don't change, you don't grow, you don't move, you stagnate. You become a raisin.

So, back to wine. You've seen the old "I Love Lucy" show, where she's crushing grapes with her feet in a big barrel. Well, that's the idea. You take grapes, crush them, add stuff, wait a while, things change. You've got wine.

In our Scripture lesson, Jesus shortened the process a bit, almost reversed it, but with the same results. It's a fun story. It takes place at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry. He and his disciples get invited to a wedding, and the reception runs out of wine. The wedding family is embarrassed. Jesus's mom tells him about it. He said, "What do you expect me to do about it?" She says, "Fix it." In no uncertain terms. So Jesus orders six large stone jars to be filled with water, then tells the wedding host to taste it. To everyone's amazement, it is great wine! The host even says, delightedly, "Most folks serve the good wine first; then when everyone is sloshed, they bring out the cheap stuff, but you've saved the best for last!" Jesus created change, water into wine, and the change created the best for last. Things were better than ever after the change. That, of course, is the ultimate promise of change: things will be better.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., looked at America of the 1950s, 1960s. He looked at how people treated one another, talked about one another. He looked at life on the other side of the tracks, on the other side of the racial divide in America. He looked at the world of "separate but equal," the Mason-Dixon Line. Whites only cemeteries and swimming pools and water fountains and bus seats and voting booths, and Dr. King said, "Things have got to change. We've been drinking the cheap wine long enough. It's time for the good stuff, No more cheap democracy, no more cheap freedom, no more cheap education, no more cheap rights. It's time at last to taste the best of democracy, freedoms, education, and rights." Was it easy? No, Was it popular? No. Was it right? Yes. Was it Biblical? Yes. Was it Christian? Yes.

So Christians got behind it. Churches got behind it, people met in churches, they sang church hymns, and when they marched, they were led by church pastors, they were organized by church ushers, they were cared for by church nurses. Folk singers and rock 'n' roll singers proclaimed, "The times they are a-changin' ... the time has come today ..."

The other wine story is from Matthew 9:17. Jesus simply says that sometimes change requires a whole new way. Sometimes a little change isn't enough. He starts with a lesson from sewing and laundry He says, "You can't put a patch of new, unshrunk cloth on an old garment because when

you wash it, it will pull apart. The new change wouldn't fit with the old way." Or, Jesus says, "You can't put new wine into old wineskins because the old wineskins have already expanded to their limit. When you put new wine in, it's still changing and fermenting and expanding, and the old wineskin can't accept that much change. It's got to go. Time for new wineskins." Sometimes in life we need new wineskins and new clothes, not just the same old, same old.

I'm sure you followed the Nelson Mandela story in the days following his death. You definitely should see the new movie, "Mandela," or rent the old movie, "Invictus," because his is one of the giant stories of the last 200 years. Born a Christian, Mandela grew up to be a peaceful protester, but he had his own conversion from non-violence to violence, from peaceful protest to terror, from hero to enemy of the state, and finally to prison ... for 27 years, 27 years of hard labor. And then he gets out. He stands for election and wins. And in winning, he converts again: from violence to reconciliation, from war to peace. He tossed out the old wineskins. Apartheid, out. Revenge, out.

If you follow world politics, you know the old wineskins. Out with the old, in with the new, then the new acts like the old. Whoever was out of power gets power and wreaks revenge on the others. At this very minute that's the story of Egypt, the Central African Republic, the Sudan, the Congo, the Ukraine; that's the M.O. of the guy in Russia, the guy in North Korea, the guy in Syria, the guy in Zimbabwe. That's the history of Afghanistan, Iraq, communism, dictatorships. "You got yours. Now I'm going to get mine and take yours." Mandela said *no* to that. Dr. King said *no*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said *no*. And they all took their lead from Jesus, the same Jesus who said, "Here's the best wine ... but get rid of those old wineskins."

The main premise of change is that there is better wine yet to come. Things can be better. Mandela looked at South Africa and said, "We can be better." King looked at America and said, "We can be better." Bonhoeffer looked at Germany and said, "We can be better." Jesus looked at all of us, all of our systems, all of our schemes, all of our ways, and said, "We can be better than that."

On Wednesday, Alida and I celebrated our anniversary in New York City. It was actually the perfect blend of the old and the new, the perfect reminder of balance that some things need to change, and some things don't. We started at the Frick Collection with its special exhibit of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring." In the next room were three more Vermeers and Rembrandts scattered about, an El Greco, a Goya, a Turner — a few of the best by the best. A reminder that some old wineskins hold up pretty well.

Then we went to a restaurant — Italian, of course — La Rivista on West 46<sup>th</sup> Street. Our last two great dinners have been at old Italian restaurants run by old, old, old Italians. Really old. I mean waiters you think will never make it to the kitchen, coat check people who couldn't possibly hold your coat, maître d's that personally knew Christopher Columbus. And all we got was the best food, the best service, the best atmosphere, the best time, from some old wineskins still delivering the best.

Then we went to the Broadway show "Newsies," set in 1899, about the kids who hawked newspapers on the streets. This was "old wineskins, vintage, old-time Broadway, song and dance, great choreography, a love interest, a little ham on the side, even tap dancing. Just old, classic Broadway. No flying Spiderman, no pyrotechnics, no lousy language. All really good.

And yet ... "Newsies" is all about change! It's about a bunch of kids, street urchins, who work for good old Mr. Pulitzer, selling his newspapers, earning barely enough to survive — till he slashes their dismal wages. And they go on strike. They're up against not only Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, but also against the slaughterhouses and the sweatshops that thrive on child labor. And they're up against the police and the movers and shakers, the "powers that be." In other words, they're up against *it*. They're beaten, bribed arrested, exploited. Something's got to change.

"The Girl with a Pearl Earring" was old wineskins, and great. The Italian restaurant was old wineskins, and great. The musical was old wineskins, and great. But the message was equally old and great: some things have got to change.

Do you read the obituaries? This week there was Franklin McCain, with the obituary headline, "Franklin McCain, Who Fought for Rights at All-White Lunch Counter, Dies at 73." On February 1, 1960, Mr. McCain was a college freshman in Greensboro, North Carolina. He and three other freshmen decided to change the world, at least one corner of their world.

So they sat down at the lunch counter at Woolworth's on the corner of Elm and Market at 3:20 in the afternoon. He ordered a doughnut. He was black. He didn't get his doughnut, but he kept coming back. Five days later, there were more than a thousand people gathered at the Woolworth's, protesting for change. The lunch counter protest spread to 55 cities in 13 states, and four years later the United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. Today, there's not a young person alive in America who would even imagine such a time. Things change.

Reflecting on that lunch counter protest years later, Mr. McCain said, "The best feeling of my life was sitting on that dumb stool ... Nothing has ever happened to be before or since that topped that feeling of being clean and fully accepted and proud of me." (Martin, Douglas. "Franklin McCain, Who Fought for Rights at All-White Lunch Counter, Dies at 73." *New York Times* 11 Jan. 2014: A13. Print.)

Dear friends, on this Dr. King holiday week, it's good to remember sometimes we have to throw out some old wineskins, and sometimes the wine that comes late tastes really good!

Thank you, Jesus!