

Surprisingly Good News
Matthew 13:31–32; John 2:1–11
Sunday, February 22, 2026 (Lent 1)
Lenten Series: Tell Me Something Good

Let us pray: Tell us something good, Lord, and help us to make it a part of our lives, in Christ. Amen.

Last week one of the youth in the church asked me what Ash Wednesday is and why we celebrate it. I said, “Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent, a time when we prepare our hearts and minds and lives for the death and resurrection of Jesus. And it is supposed to remind us that we are going to die.” And her reaction was, “Oh...that’s not fun.” So I said, “No, but while Lent *begins* with the reminder that we are going to die, it *ends* with the promise that Jesus has overcome death so that we can live forever with God, *and* we are alive *right now*, so how will we live our lives in a way that gives thanks to God for this life that we have been given?” I don’t think that actually *helped* or made things any better, but I understood her reaction.

So many times, we look at the season of Lent, and we think, “Oh...that’s not fun.” Lent is focused on repentance and what in our lives needs to *change* so that we can orient our lives to God and receive the good news of Christ’s resurrection. For many people, it’s a season of *self-denial*. They’ll stop drinking alcohol or eating chocolate or whatever for forty days. We stop singing hymns that have *alleluia* in them, because we save that for the celebration of Easter. It’s not exactly a *feel good* season. In fact, a lot of the time, Lent can come across as a season of *bad news*.

But our faith is about *good news*! At the heart of our faith is this great good news that God became one of us in Jesus Christ to live life with us, so that we can see how God wants *us* to live, and in his death and resurrection, Jesus overcame the power of sin and death, setting us free to live new lives with God and with each other, now and forever. That is *good news*! And this season of Lent is all about the *buildup* to

that good news. It's about getting ourselves in a place where we can *hear* that good news and *believe* it and make it a part of *our lives*.

So we are starting a new sermon series for Lent called, "Tell Me Something Good." It is about finding the *good news* in Lent. We are going to be focusing on the teachings and miracles of Jesus in the gospels, and that word *gospel* is a Greek word that literally means, "good news." By focusing on these stories and teachings of Jesus, can we bring *good news* to a world that is so often burdened by *bad news*? And the idea for today is that the good news is so good that it catches us by surprise.

We're going to start today in John's gospel, because something really interesting happens there that you might not pick up on. In the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus begins his ministry by spending 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted by Satan. And many times, that's how we start the season of Lent, by focusing on those stories of his temptation in the wilderness. It's a *somber* beginning. But in John's gospel, Jesus' ministry does not start in the *wilderness*; it starts at a *wedding*. It doesn't start with *fasting*; it starts with a *feast*. It's not *somber*; it's a *celebration*. And it doesn't start with *temptation*; it starts with a *miracle*.

It says that on the third day there was a wedding in the town of Cana. Now that "third day" should alert us to something, because *what else* happened on the third day? Jesus rose from the dead. So this is foreshadowing that something *big* and *good* and *miraculous* is about to happen here. Jesus and his disciples are at the wedding, and Jesus' mother comes to him and tells him that they have run out of wine. That would have been *bad news*. And not because they all just like drinking. Basically, the party was about to be over before it should have been. And it would have reflected very poorly on the person hosting the wedding. It's a reflection of their hospitality or lack thereof.

So Mary tells Jesus that they have run out of wine, and Jesus says, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? It’s not *our* party. Not our wedding, not our worry. Let the *host* deal with it.” But it’s like Mary knows that Jesus is going to do something about this. She says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Well, he didn’t say that he was going to tell them to do anything, so she kind of puts him on the spot there. He has just said it’s not their worry, and now she has basically forced his hand. He *has* to do something now, because they’re standing there waiting for him.

Jesus sees six large stone jars that were used to hold water that the guests would use to purify themselves. It wasn’t just for hygiene; it was like a ritual of purification. They would wash themselves in a way that signified the removal of impurities that kept them from being acceptable to God. It was like a cleansing of sin. Jesus tells the servants to fill those jars with water, draw some out, and take it to the chief steward, the person running the wedding. And when the steward tastes it, he finds that the water has been turned into wine. Not just *some* wine, but *really good* wine. And not just a *little* wine, but over 150 gallons of it. So while running out of wine would have reflected very badly on the host, *this* will be seen as an act of *extravagance* that will reflect really *well* on the host.

This is *good news*! But why? Why does Jesus do this? Just so the party can keep going? Just so the host can save face? Why would we care about that? It seems like a pretty small reason to perform a miracle; like there would have to be a bigger reason than that. Well, hold onto that. We’ll come back to it in just a moment.

Flash over to our reading from Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus tells his disciples a parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” Now, when Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven,” he’s not just talking about

heaven. That's Matthew's way of saying, "the kingdom of God." It is the realm of God's rule and reign, all that over which God exercises power and authority. It is God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

So Jesus says that the living out of God's will is like a mustard seed. It starts very small, and it turns into something big.

When Jesus turned water into wine, it didn't start with something *big*. It started with him and his disciples just going to a wedding party; living life. It started with Mary telling Jesus that they were out of wine. A very small, simple gesture, but someone had to let him know. It didn't start with Jesus telling the *servants* to turn the water into wine. It started with him telling them to put water in the jars. But when we are just living our lives, and we bring our concerns to Jesus, and we listen to him and do what he tells us to do, those small, simple acts of faithfulness can turn into something surprising. They can turn into something bigger than we can even imagine. God can do big things with the smallest, simplest act.

This past Wednesday, our son Ryan and I went over to Covenant Presbyterian Church and helped pack cleanup buckets for people recovering from natural disasters. I spent about five minutes putting various objects into a five-gallon bucket – sponges and soap and gloves and washcloths and garbage bags. There were about 20 of us there, and we each made one bucket. This did not require a massive effort on my part. I honestly spent more time eating pizza. But that bucket is going to go to someone somewhere who really needs it, and it is going to reflect God's love to them. That bucket is going to be a *godsend* to someone whose life has been turned upside down. And what we all did in about five minutes is going to touch at least 20 lives. God can do big things with the smallest, simplest acts.

Like when we pack meals for Rise Against Hunger. We spend about an hour and a half doing the same job over and over. Scooping rice into a bag over and over again. Or you *weigh* bag after bag. Or you *seal* bag after bag. Or you put bag after bag into a box. You're not slaving away in a kitchen, cooking a gourmet meal. You're not going to the store and buying all of the ingredients. You are simply showing up and doing one very simple thing over and over again. But when you add all of those very simple things up, it feeds over 10,000 people who are literally starving. They didn't know where their next meal was coming from, until it came from you. God can do big things with the smallest, simplest acts.

Reaching out to someone who has been having a hard time. Calling them or sending them a note in the mail.

Inviting someone to lunch or dinner.

Forgiving someone or asking for their forgiveness.

You have no idea what God can do with your smallest, simplest act.

So let's look back at Jesus turning water into wine. Sure, it's a miracle. But it's not quite on the same level as raising the dead or healing a leper or restoring someone's sight. It seems pretty small in comparison. Until we see what's actually going on here.

Remember, those six stone water jars were for the wedding guests to cleanse and purify themselves as they were coming in to the wedding, so that they were keeping Jewish law; they were right with God, acceptable to God. Jesus takes *those jars of water*, reserved for a special religious ritual, and turns *that* water into wine. What that means is, there's no more water left for the rite of purification. People can't

wash themselves, cleanse themselves as they come to the feast. That's a *problem*, right? But Jesus takes the water of *obligation* and turns it into the *wine* of *celebration*. And in doing so, he is saying, "You don't *need* that anymore. You don't *need* to wash, to go through this ritual of cleansing and purifying yourself in order to be acceptable to God. That stuff is not going to keep you from God anymore. That's not what makes you *right* with God, *at one* with God. We can *celebrate* now because I am *removing that barrier* that keeps you from God."

So many times, we can fall into the mindset that I have to *do* more and more in order to please God and be right with God. That I have to *do these things* to be at one with God, to be *acceptable* to God, at *peace* with God. That I have to *prove* myself to God, and God's blessing for me is about what I *do*. But Jesus did not come to say, "God loves you *if...*" *If* you do the right things, the right way. *If* you meet all the requirements. *If* you *earn it* or *deserve it*. *If* you *prove* your faith. Jesus says, "*Just the way you are*, with your dirty hands and broken lives; with all your pain and mistakes. God loves you and accepts you and is with you *just the way you are.*"

A life of faith is about *celebrating* that Jesus has broken down all the barriers that work to keep us from God. That is the message that we have to share with the world. That you are beautiful and wonderful and loved and your life has *value* simply because of *who you are*, not what you *do* or what you've *done*. That is an *extraordinarily* countercultural message. Because the world around us tells us that our worth, our value is based on what we *do*, how hard we *work*, what we *produce*, what we *have*, what we *earn*. And what happens is, we *hear* that so much every day in all these subtle little ways, and it's really easy to buy into that. And we think that God's love for us, God's blessing for us depends on what we do to *earn it*.

We *are* called to do small, simple acts of faithfulness. But not *so that* we can earn God's blessing and favor and love. It is *because* God's blessing and favor and love has been poured out on us in Jesus Christ

that we *want* to do those small, simple acts of faithfulness as a way of saying *thank you* to God. Jesus took the water of *obligation* and turned it into the wine of *celebration*, and if we get too focused or stuck on the *obligation*, then we're going to end up missing out on the *celebration*! We will end up missing out on the good news that *we are free*. Free from the *obligation* of ritual. Free from the need to do more and more to earn God's favor. Free to be accepted and to accept others. Free to forgive because we are forgiven. Free to love because we are loved. Free to live our lives *with God* and with *each other* in *celebration*! Free to drink up the miracle that we are good enough for God *just the way we are*.

That is the surprisingly good news that this season is building toward. That in the relatively small, simple act of turning water into wine, God is doing something bigger than we can even imagine. And God can do big things with *our* small, simple acts of faithfulness; things that might just surprise the world, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.