

Extravagant Sign - John 2: 1-11 and 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11
A Sermon from January 17, 2010
Immanuel Congregational United Church of Christ

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Some years ago, a stranger appeared. When all seemed lost. People were ready to quit. All the thrill had gone out of the game.

But then He came to town.

He wasn't from around here. His home was far away.

But he wanted to play on our team. And he was willing to cross closed borders to reach us.

And we were smart enough to let him in, because we knew what he could do. He was the real thing.

Oh sure, other people had tried, but they had all fallen short of the goal.

But this one had something that no one else could match.

We were glad when he entered the arena.

Some of you will say, "Yes, I know who you are talking about. I know who you mean."

The guy I am talking about, the stranger who crossed borders to reach us?

He was from Canada. And he really did know how to play the game. And the game was hockey. And he was the real thing. He was Wayne Gretsky.

I guess Wayne Gretsky does fit the bill. In his 20 year career in the National Hockey League, he scored over 800 goals.

He set 61 performance records. People called him great.

But when it comes to real achievement, here's where it really gets interesting.

If you talk to Wayne Gretsky, about his career and its awards, what do you think he is most proud of?

Not what he did on his own, but how he helped his teammates to reach goals of their own.

That's right. Wayne Gretsky led the National Hockey League in Assists.

He came to greatness by helping his team to be a better team.

Now, maybe that's who you were thinking of, when I mention the stranger who came to town, when all seemed lost.

But there is one far greater than Wayne Gretsky who crossed closed borders to reach us.

He is God made human in Jesus Christ, and he invites us to play on his team.

He's not from around here, and yet he has come to be with us.

Our God is so determined not to be God without us that God becomes one of us. This is what the church calls the incarnation.

Sometimes when we think of God we think in terms of detachment, distance, and divine aloofness, as though constantly distancing God was a means of honoring God.

This detached God is as absolute and majestic as a god can get. And this God is somewhat removed from the world.

Here is a God who has evolved into something or someone who is static, a mega-controller. We have tried to make God static so we would feel safe. With a static God, a God who stays put, we can come to God on our terms.

But, we do not come to God.

God has come, will come and continues to come to us.

God is determined not to be God without us.

As Christians we celebrate a God who comes to us, enters into our lives and takes up residence where we live. With the birth of Jesus Christ, God comes close enough to be not only God for us, but also God with us. God steps up, steps in, and steps out in a most amazing overture of overflowing, abundant love.

In today's reading from John, Jesus is depicted as showing up with his friends at a wedding feast. The image is of Jesus seeking people rather than people seeking Jesus.

The hosts of this wedding feast are in a terrible predicament...the wine is gone...there is nothing left to drink.

However much we appreciate hospitality today, the people of Jesus' time and culture practiced it as a survival skill, a way of looking after one another in a hostile and perilous environment, and an assurance of being looked after in turn. This host was in an embarrassing spot!

Jesus' mother goes to Jesus about this shortage of wine. Jesus balks at first, saying "My hour has not yet come." Yet timing eventually takes a backseat to the need at that moment and Jesus responds with anything but an ordinary response!

Jesus has 6 stone jars filled to the brim with water. These jars were special because they held the water used in religious purification rituals. Each jar held between 90 and 150 gallons of water. From these big and special and brim-filled jars comes the best-tasting wine served at the wedding.

The wedding guests would have known something important was happening when such wonderful wine flowed at the end, not the beginning, of the celebration.

When one jar of wine would have been enough, when any quality of wine would have satisfied, the God incarnate in Jesus offers each person present the best, the most brim-filled abundance. God continues to offer that abundant love to each of us every day. God is determined not to be God without us.

Today we have our Annual Meeting.

Today we review and celebrate how this church showed God's abundance in 2009, and discern the will of God for Oxford Immanuel Congregational United Church of Christ in 2010.

How are the changing times we live in shaping the ways we serve and witness to God?

What call has come, what need has arisen, so that we might show the abundance of God here and now?

How is Immanuel Congregational United Church of Christ looking to share God's abundance with generations yet to come?

What hidden abundance lies within us ready to be transformed like the water in the great stone jars?

Some years ago, a stranger appeared among us, when all seemed lost.

His home was far away. He wanted to play on our team. And he was willing to cross closed borders to reach us.

He crossed the borders of space and time and grief and loss to reach our hearts.

His name is Jesus Christ.

Let him in. His living presence will change the nature of the game.

Let us pray:

Oh, Lord Jesus

For the huge risk you took in becoming human, in order to bring out the best in us, we praise you.

For the huge risk you took in entrusting yourself to us, and sharing our vulnerability, we praise you.

For the incalculable risk you took in emptying yourself, and allowing yourself to be killed in order to free us from the power of evil, we praise you.

God in Jesus.

God with us.

Immanuel.

Amen.

Sources:

Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much by Anne Wilson Schaff

"World Record for Assists" a Christmas Eve meditation by Rev. Rick Boyd

"God Comes to Us" by William Willimon, from Pulpit Resource Vol. 38, No. 1, Year C, January, February, March 2010

"Extravagant Sign" from Weekly Seeds at i.ucc by Kate Huey
Reflection and Focus Questions