

“Knowing from Whence It Came”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ January 19, 2025

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and John 2:1-11

Picture yourself in the serving line at a potluck meal in the Fellowship Hall. In the festive mood of the occasion, with senses excited by the sight and aroma of all that delicious food, you forget your diet and start looking for side dishes. You pass through the line heaping ample portions of fried chicken, potato and macaroni salads, and three bean salads on your plate. Then you come to a dish that you don't recognize. It looks interesting enough, so you take a chance and pile a large spoonful onto your plate beside your traditional favorites. You sit down beside a friend who points to this dish and says, "I wanted to try that, but I didn't have room. Let me know how it tastes. If it's good, I'll get some when I go back for seconds." You then take a large bite of this untested concoction, and your taste buds immediately proclaim that you have made a horrible mistake. It isn't merely bad, it's awful. Then, as you swallow hard and lean over to tell your friend to spare his plate, the saint sitting across the table smiles broadly and says, "I hope you like my casserole. It's a new recipe I tried just for today." Now you know "from whence it came." If the look on your face doesn't already tell the story, what do you say?

Knowing "from whence it came" makes all the difference in the world. Those who serve the wine at the wedding feast in Cana had a good laugh at the expense of the steward who "tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from." The hired help knew more than the boss. The steward thought the bridegroom had foolishly saved the best wine for last. The servants knew what had really happened. They knew "from whence it came" and that made all the difference. The steward could only scratch his head at an unwarranted change in customary practice. The servants and by implication, the disciples could marvel at this first sign performed by Jesus, a miraculous manifestation of his glory.

The steward did not know "from whence the good wine came." In the gospel of John, that is not insignificant. This gospel frequently makes an issue of knowing "from whence someone or something comes."

The prologue announces that the Word made flesh came to his own home, but his own people did not receive him. Those, however, who recognized the true

identity of Jesus, who perceived “from whence he came,” received “power to become children of god.” As the narrative unfolds, the fulfillment of those verses enhances the central drama. The gospel divides people into two categories: Those who accept Jesus and those who reject him, i.e. those who do and do not perceive “from whence he came.”

In chapter 7 Jesus astonished celebrants at the feast of Tabernacles with his knowledge of the law. They thought they knew “from whence he came,” and wondered how a Galilean hillbilly could have attained such wisdom. Jesus responded, “Do you know me, and do you know from which I came? I have not come of my own accord; but the one who sent me is true and that one you do not know.” Only those aware of “from whence he came,” perceived his true identity.

Other examples appear throughout the narrative. At some point everyone who encounters Jesus must answer the question asked of him by Pilate: “From whence are you?” In the eyes of the evangelist, knowing the answer made all the difference in the world.

The question frequently emerges in the accounts of the miracles performed by Jesus. We might expect those who witness his miracles to have the upper hand in identifying Jesus, but that is not always the case. The lame man in Chapter 5 gained the ability to stand and to walk but did not develop faith. He did not perceive “from whence Jesus came” and he remained an outsider who betrayed Jesus to authorities. In contrast, the blind man in chapter 9 received both physical and spiritual sight. Because he discovered through faith “from whence Jesus came,” he defied the authorities and entered the community of believers.

The author of the fourth Gospel implies that unless we ponder “from whence it came,” we may not ever recognize a miracle when it occurs. We may, like the steward at the wedding feast, ask the wrong questions of the wrong person.

We live in a scientific world, a world that searches for hard data or logical theories to explain everything. Our worldview has little room for miracles. We typically conclude that if miracles ever did happen, they belong to a distant past or no longer occur. But have miracles stopped? Or have we, by active intent or passive neglect lost the ability to ponder “from whence things come?”

People often comment that something in a part of the Sunday School lesson or a portion of the worship service seemed written or designed especially for them. With astonishing frequency, the very things on our minds throughout the week,

the questions, and issues with which we struggle daily, surface when we gather for study, prayer and worship. We consider that coincidental. We may change our minds when we ponder “from whence it came.”

Effective teachers and worship leaders want to make what happens on Sunday relevant. They want it to interact with our daily lives. But none of them read minds. Whether or not we call it miraculous, all those coincidences between our thoughts and our experiences is a sign that something far greater than any of us, works here among us. When we stop to ponder, “from whence it came,” we may find glory manifested around us and ourselves more able to believe in a God actively involved in the present.

The steward at the wedding feast in Cana took it for granted that the host provided the wine. Where else could it have come from? Do we not also frequently take for granted what happens around us and fail to perceive miraculous manifestation of glory in our midst?

Every 24 hours the sun rises and brings a brand-new day – a natural fact of earthly existence. But does not that same rising sun signify far more? The worst we can do will not stop it. The best we can do will not alter it. Each day comes as a gift, but we may never behold its glory unless we ponder “from whence it came.”

On the Sundays that we celebrate the sacrament of communion, the bread and the cup sit on the communion table. One of our members places them there. They offer merely a taste, not nearly enough to keep us alive. But doesn't that same loaf and cup signify far more? As we ponder “from whence they came,” can we not perceive a miraculous transformation that elevates them above the hands that placed them on the table and enables us to receive from them the spiritual food that we all need?

Much of what we experience in life depends on whether we stop at the identification of good wine or seek beyond the wine, the divine manifestation it represents. Instead, let us enjoy the wine and drain the most from it: let us ponder “from whence it came.” Amen.