

Have you heard about that new restaurant? What's new with you?

Did you see that new show?

We all like novelty in one way or another. Yet, this newness can quickly disappear as we become familiar with it. Soon the novelty of a newly renovated “L” station becomes nothing special, until we find another new experience – hello cell service underground! It turns out that it's not just because of a cultural shift that novelty wears off easily. Rather, it's hardwired into our brains. As humans we seek out and appreciate novelty. New things grab our attention. Researchers have found that we essentially have a part of the brain that is our “novelty center” which responds to novel stimuli. This novelty center causes an increase in dopamine, which ultimately makes us want to go exploring in search of a reward.¹ This experience of novelty is what we've been focused on here in church for the past three weeks.

¹ <https://blog.bufferapp.com/novelty-and-the-brain-how-to-learn-more-and-improve-your-memory>

It all started on Epiphany Sunday when we focused on Matthew's story of the magi who bring gifts that symbolize Jesus' royalty, divinity, and foreshadow his death. In this story we saw something completely new as God's presence now is for all people, all races, all religious backgrounds, and all nationalities.

Last week we got a glimpse of something novel at Jesus' baptism. In Luke we saw that the key difference from every other gospel was that Jesus receives the Spirit after he prays. We saw something new compared to other baptisms – a new voice, a new spirit, and a new connection between what is sacred and what is profane.

Then today, today we get a party – a wedding party. There they are three days into a seven-day ordeal and the wine is out. Woops - time to fire the wedding planner! Now, we have to remember that people did not often drink water. Water wasn't healthy, purification processes weren't in place, and the Brita filter won't be created for

about another 1,900 years. Instead these jugs are for ritual purification before individuals enter the temple. As a side note, this ritual process would eventually become our baptismal rite in Christianity. Anyway, Jesus takes these empty jugs, has them filled with water, and turns them into over 175 gallons of wine. To get an idea of how much wine we're talking about, I've got a few jugs of communion wine here. This is 5 gallons, this is 10 gallons, this is 15 gallons...now multiply this by over 11 times – now that's a party! Jesus's action goes beyond saving the wedding planner, and it's more than just saving the party. As one scholar puts it, by using these empty ritual purification jugs Jesus is being critical. He's judging an empty religious state that lacks hospitality and vigor. Those six ritual jars signify the old order. Then into the older vessel Jesus provides overflowing wine. This overflowing wine is about abundance. It's a sign that something *new* is going to happen. In the verses to follow Jesus will explain that his body is the *new* temple (2:13-25), he'll challenge Nicodemus to a *new* birth from above (3:1-

21), Jesus will offer a *new* type of water to an unnamed woman at a well (4:1-45), and he'll give *new* life to the son of a royal official (4:46-54). In just two chapters of John alone we'll hear that Jesus takes these older symbols of Judaism and will give them *new* meaning.²

And isn't that what we need in our lives – something new? We get stuck in the humdrum of work. We get caught in the same things – we get up, we have coffee, we take a shower, we go to work, we study, we play, we take care of the kids, we walk the dog, we search for a job, we make food, we go to the gym, we watch TV, we go to bed. We do the same things. Our society gets caught in the status quo, by running the world with power and money and status. We get caught in the–isms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, classism, and ethnocentrism. And, Jesus reminds us that we get caught in religious oppression too. Our religious institutions become

² Bridges, Linda Mckinnish. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1.* "Second Sunday after the Epiphany- Exegetical Perspective" p261-265.

disconnected, inhospitable, drained, out-of-date, and flat out oppressive. So what do you do with it all? You look to God's continued renewal of all things.

One modern day saint who knew how to find a new thing using the gifts of the past was Martin Luther King Jr. MLK studied Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence in seminary. MLK learned these principles and then applied them to a new situation. Although it wasn't always successful, the principles of nonviolence aroused the interest of many blacks and whites. Eventually in 1964 MLK was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for applying the nonviolent resistance principles to the struggle for racial equality. MLK got us thinking about a new application when he made the profound connection between the some and the many in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. In the letter he said, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given up by the oppressor; it must be

demanded by the oppressed... We must come to see ...that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"³ It was MLK's impatience for something *new* that helped bring about something *new*. It was his hope for something *novel* that turned a situation into something *novel*.

This novel experience is what we've been hit over the head with the past three weeks. We've been told – hey, there's something new here, with this baby and these magi; hey, there's something new here, this voice and this Spirit and this prayer at this guy's baptism; hey, there's something new here, this guy just turned water into wine. Hey, you get it? This is something totally new going on here. And –spoiler alert- in the future we're going to see something new from this guy as well. We're going to see a new vision of God's world where all are welcome, where the old systems and old leaders don't stand in the way of new experiences of God's presence. We're going to see signs of Jesus being set apart as different, or in fancy words,

³ <http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/king.pdf>

we're going to get a glimpse of Jesus' holiness. We're going to be opened up to the mystery of our God in new ways and at the same time, at the exact same time, we're going to be grounded in a God who has been with us all along. We're going to see Jesus take the customs and the practices of his people and put a new spin on it. We're going to see the Passover bread broken and wine poured at a table in a new way one important night. Then again in another new way you and I, we will gather to step into that mystery at this table (points to communion table) – a mystery that's bigger than ourselves. Here, in this place, this time, here is something new.

You see, it's all “something old and something new” – it's like the wisdom of that old English rhyme. Yet this time, it's more than for good luck. For the challenge of every generation of faithful people is to reclaim something old and something new. It is our challenge to find those new ways to see God working. It's our task to take the old and turn it into something new. And maybe, just maybe, as we

glimpse the newness of our faith, we'll feel something different. Maybe we'll find new ways of doing ministry, a new way of being church, a new way of reading the Bible, maybe in the midst of that newness; we'll feel the urge to explore with our God. Maybe we'll discover God anew with Bible studies like Brew & Bible, maybe our spirits will be transformed with our Arts Sanctuary events, and maybe we'll be brought together in a new way with potlucks and The Listening Project. My prayer for you is just that, as you come to this place and hear something new, or see something new, or experience the many new things we're doing here, I hope that dopamine kicks in. I hope it propels you to explore - to explore the scriptures, to explore the lives of others, *and* to explore the mystery of our God. For this day we remember our God who takes old empty jugs and turns them into overflowing abundant gifts. May you notice God's abundant gifts today as you see God's new life before you. Thanks be to God who makes all things new. Amen.