

The Great Advantage Of Demotion

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[0 : 0 0] to be plugged in or? Well it's a great delight to be with you on this lovely day in downtown Vancouver and I don't know I would like to just make a statement on why we call this the the the great advantage of demotion since we've had a singularly significant demotion in our in our province yesterday but I would like to tell you that William Vander Zem hasn't done anything I haven't done only he's had so many more people to help him repent and that's the that's the advantage of being a high-profile personality you get a lot of help and yeah I mean there's a scale thing I I'm not sure that I can do it on the same scale but it's it's important I think just to to bear that in mind because that does have a lot to do with what I have to say today and what

I hope I hope that you will understand as we go through this story from the second chapter of John which is the the miracle of of changing water into wine this little incident which is a very insignificant little incident that took place in a very insignificant little village in a very insignificant little synagogue or something which was which is in in Cana of Galilee and a wedding which is a very commonplace event on the whole it's very particular and individual for the people principles involved but weddings by and large aren't that significant and so the changing of the water into wine is something that happened but this whole story is fraught with so much teaching and so much understanding and so much significance in terms of the the the proclamation of the gospel that is a very very significant story scholars in the gospel according to st. John say it's the first of the seven signs given in the in the gospel of John which gives you the kind of structure on which the gospel is written when I call this the great advantage of demotion what I mean is that the people at the top didn't know what was going on but the servants knew what was going on and it's it's very important I think for all of us to be at the level where we know what's going on and I think that we I may come back to that in a few minutes the there's a special honored and respected place of the woman Mary who was the mother of Jesus that she was taking responsibility when she saw the dilemma that the the wedding was heading for and uh... and uh... even though the words which even from I can remember our first time at this passage in Sunday school people uh... picking up on woman what have I to do with you my hour is not yet come sounded like a scolding from son to mother which in

Sunday school was an unthinkable event and uh... the uh... and yet that's that's what it looks like but all the scholars say there isn't any taint of that in it at all it was a very ordinary remark and didn't have any lack of respect or love uh... when he met when uh... the the problem was created because there was seven guests that had come late to the wedding in terms of the disciples of Jesus and uh... so the the wine was all gone which has vast ramifications for the nature of Jesus disciples but I won't go into the uh... uh... the wine all being gone uh... Jesus taking charge of the situation uh... went to the six twenty to thirty gallon jars that were there for the rites of purification uh... it was lovely in case Kenya a year ago when we went to a a very formal well it wasn't formal but in some ways it was formal in a in a private home in the kuru in northern Kenya and uh... there was a number of guests they're all professional people and their wives though they had little to do with each other during this luncheon party and uh... so it was hard to tell who belonged to who but when we all went into the dining room for lunch we all went by a little sink which was right in the dining room where you washed your hands and uh... and uh... that was part of that was virtually like uh...

saying grace this purification rite was there it was lovely to see it because it reminded me so much of the new testament and the lovely way in which anybody who came in late then and wanted to shake hands nobody offered their hand they they offered their wrist so you could take them and shake them like that without uh... depurifying them so uh... it it was lovely that this this this this story is filled with all sorts of uh... of traditions which uh... which we can identify with in our own lives when the servants had done what jesus said filled the the water pots to the brim and then drawn off some wine and taken it to the head waiter the head waiter tasted it and said ah... superb and uh... went to the bridegroom and said you know this is a great you have uh... you have uh... you have kept the best wine till the end you know which is which is a great story i mean that's a great event uh... uh... a wonderful wonderful wonderful picture of the kingdom this was a sign of the coming of the kingdom and that's to be the nature of the kingdom uh... william temple talks about it in terms of uh... uh... people in their relationship to one another you know when you when you make first impressions how important it is that you you totally deceive the person you meet into thinking better than the truth of you and uh...

and the difficulty of any sustained relationship is that the deception becomes harder and harder to maintain and uh... gradually breaks down and so when they thought they had met somebody of great importance they suddenly decided just an ordinary person of no particular significance and then they find out how weak and feeble and insignificant you really are, how mixed up you are in your personal life, how much you suffer from your family of origin and from other confusing sources of behavior and that you're really nobody.

[6 : 41] And you go on and look for somebody else for a friend. That's the way we deal with each other. And of course I think that really is in some ways what I would like to describe as the, sorry, the Van Der Zand syndrome.

When I said to you that all these little people here, like you and me and the rest of us, you know, and then you get one large profile person in here who gets promoted to be very important.

Now all these people are very much the same as him, but he's on the big screen. And when you get on the big screen, you see all the warts and wrinkles and all the things that are wrong. You know, it would be true if you put any of these people on the big screen, you know, that there are lots of people here who, I mean, I don't know how many of us would like to be put on the big screen, but that's what happens.

When you get up on the big screen and everybody sees what's wrong. And so when life begins, a lot of people think that the great thing in life is to go from being nothing to being somebody, but the really great thing in life is to go from somebody to being an ordinary person again.

And so that this is in fact, though it may not be apparent to the principles involved, this is in fact a great day for the man who's had to step down. You know, because the whole kingdom of God could open up for him today.

[8 : 04] He would realize a whole lot of things that you lose sight of when you're on the big screen. And that's true for all of us. Striving as we may be to get up to the place of prominence and the place of power and the place of wealth and the place of prestige and the place of recognition by our fellow man.

Struggling to get up there. Then the only thing that can happen to you is people find out what it's like and then you have to come down. And it's what happens when you come down. It really is important. That's why there's a great advantage to demotion.

It's a great advantage to being where the servants are who know what's happening. Well, that's what happened when the head waiter said to the bridegroom, you've kept the best till the last.

And in our relationships, I think the same thing is true. You may be very much impressed with the person you meet. You then find out that they have clay feet. You then find out that they are a beloved child of God.

And then you recognize them in an entirely different way. And that's what we have to come to in our relationship to one another. I belong to a parish which is considered fairly prominent socially.

[9 : 12] And there's a whole lot of high-profile people in a way. And nobody goes to church to have their profile damaged. You generally go to church to have it enhanced somewhat.

But we've been at it a bit too long now. And the damage and the cracks are beginning to show. And the parish is tending to break down a little bit. And I don't know quite what to do about it. But it's probably the best thing that could happen.

Because you begin to see what happens when people are accepted, not for worldly prominence or wealth or power, prestige or recognition or any of those things, but they are seen as the totally unique child of God, loved by, forgiven by, redeemed by, and indwelt by the Spirit of God.

And that's the best that's kept to the last. That's the thing we have to come to recognize in one another. And that's the basis of the quite unique relationship we are to have to one another in Christ.

So the good wine was kept to the last. And this miracle of changing it in the water into wine was known only to a few people.

[10 : 28] And it says at the end of the story that Jesus manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him. And that really is the point of the story, is that the disciples came to put their personal trust in Jesus Christ.

And I would say that if you wanted to capsule in one sentence, what I think the function of Wednesday here at the cathedral is, in terms of this session, is that somehow Jesus Christ might be presented to you in such a way that you will put your personal trust in him.

That that's what I want you to do. I don't think that I can do it, but I think it can be done. And I think it is the miracle. I mean, it has the quality of changing water into wine, that you will come from a place of non-faith to a place where you put your personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

And that's what happened to his disciples on this occasion. In the midst of this, where all the busyness and all the glamour and all the tradition and all the festivities of a wedding were going on, they saw something happen when the water was drawn and it had become wine.

They saw a massive difference that had taken place. And what that's described as in John's Gospel in these verses is that God manifested his glory. And the result of catching a glimpse of that was that the disciples believed in him.

[11 : 57] And so that becomes what this whole process is all about. Now, what I want just to add to that story is one or two things that I think are also significant.

And that is this picture here. Here is the individual believer, and the individual believer comes to put his personal trust or faith in Jesus Christ.

That's something that happens to you. As you encounter the person of Jesus Christ, perhaps through the foolishness of preaching, perhaps by your own reading, perhaps in the quiet of your own heart, you come to put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

That's the thing that happens, and that's the beginning of the radically new and different thing in a person's life. When, glimpsing the glory of God, they come to put their faith and trust in Christ.

Now, the helpful thing that I found out about that is that over here you have Christian orthodoxy. And Christian orthodoxy demands a belief in the Trinity, a belief in the Church, a belief in creation, a belief in the Second Coming, a belief in the Doctrine of Justification, a belief in the Atonement, and on and on you can go, all the way down here.

[13 : 26] This is Christian orthodoxy down here. But it starts with personal faith in Jesus Christ. So that what you have in our world is a lot of people who have personal faith in Jesus Christ but don't know anything about orthodoxy, which is regrettable, and that's why I'm in business, to try and see that they can come to know that.

But the other and probably more dangerous thing is that there's a whole lot of people who are orthodox who don't have any faith in Jesus Christ. And that's the other side of the problem. And that's why demotion sometimes becomes necessary in order that people who may be wonderfully orthodox can find out what it is.

Because in this demotion, you suddenly, you know, I think that you suddenly come into the reality of what faith is all about. You see, to me, I guess the key sentence when I'm talking about this demotion is the sentence which comes in this story, which says, they didn't know where this wine had come from, but the servants knew.

The people at the bottom level knew. Now, into all our lives, there needs to be some kind of personal contact like that, where you are in touch with what is happening.

You're in touch with the kind of reality which is at the basis of our human existence. I mean, you experience it at least in a part if you pick up a child, if you ride a horse, if you ski down a mountain, if you sail a boat, if you dig a garden, if you hug a friend, if you exchange a kiss.

[15 : 08] Sometimes there's a kind of reality in that for us, which is really important because our lives become so artificial and so overblown and so puffed up and we get so out of touch with reality and the kind of world in which we live downtown that we really long to have something, you know, some kind of reality.

And I suppose the alcohol problem is in a sense an attempt to get back to some reality from the artificiality within which we live so much of the time so that people have to try and do that.

I think I probably told you the story about the fellow from England who got drunk every Friday night after work, you know, and he lived in a great industrial town of Manchester and somebody came to him and said, why do you do this every Friday night?

He says, it's the fastest way of getting out of Manchester. And, you know, he needed to get in touch with some reality again. And we very desperately in our lives need to be in touch with some kind of reality.

And if you look at the characters in this story, you find Mary, who was feeling responsible for the situation but didn't know what to do, turning to Jesus and asking him.

[16 : 33] You have the bridegroom, who didn't know what was happening, even though he was, in a sense, the host. You have the head waiter, who knew good wine, but he didn't know where it came from.

You had the servants, who saw it happen but didn't understand what it meant. And then you have the disciples, who saw in it the glory of God and put their personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

And you see, that was where they, more than anybody else, got in touch with reality, the kind of reality that belongs to them. And that, I think, is...

That's why I think this story is one of getting in touch.

You see, this business, which I tried to describe to you in this thing here, where we can hide in the mass of humanity and what we do or what we don't do is not of any great significance.

[17 : 37] You know, we can cheat a little on our income tax and do this and that and the other thing. You know, we can mess around quite a lot, but nobody pays much attention because we're not that significant. It's only when you get blown up into a large scale that you suddenly find that what you do is pretty inconsistent.

And then the crash comes. Whatever way it comes, it comes for all of us. And we make the great discovery that God doesn't do business with power and with premiers and with bishops and with prelates and with people in high positions and people with high profile.

God simply can't do business with them because they haven't got time to do business with God. I mean, that's what happens to us in our, you know, as we become inflated with self-importance or as we become exalted among the people and as we get up in the place where we are treated as gods.

And you get up into that place and it's a hellish place to be because you lose touch with any kind of reality because God doesn't do business with that. God wants to reveal his glory to people and he can only reveal it in a sense to the little people.

It's, you know, it's like the fact that you can only see the glory of God through the eye of a needle and you've got to be kind of small to see through there. And when you have this, you know, when your vanity and your self-sufficiency is over-expanded, you just don't see the glory of God and God has to, in his grace and mercy, demote you to the point where you do see the glory of God.

[19 : 23] And in seeing the glory of God, you do what the disciples did and that is put their personal faith and trust in Jesus and allow themselves to be led by him. And you've got to recognize that life is being very generous to you when it offers you some kind of demotion so that you get into touch with the glory of God and recognize what it means.

See, God welcomes into his kingdom, and you can read this in John's Gospel and we'll come across it in the course of this series. God welcomes into the kingdom the woman with five husbands and the significant other that she's now living with.

You know, that there doesn't seem to be any hesitation about her becoming a believer, becoming an inheritor of the kingdom of God in the story in John chapter 4. No hesitation about it at all.

But then you go to the pastoral epistles and you look at the people who are going to be put up in the public eye as the pastors and the elders and the deacons and the bishops and those people and he says, okay, if you're going up there, watch it.

Look at your marriage, look at your children, look at your relationship to alcohol, look at the way you treat people, look at your capacity for hospitality, check yourself out on all these things because those are going to become important.

[20 : 43] They're not going to become important in terms of you coming into the kingdom because the qualifications for coming into the kingdom, you already meet wonderfully, you know, you were a sinner and that's the qualification.

But if you're going to be lifted up in front of people, you've got to be careful because you're going to get shot down. And so God has to bring us down in size in order that we can see his glory and so that we can come to put our faith and trust in him.

Well, now, my friend says to me, he says, what do you do when people come to you and say, ah, Mr. Van Der Zandt, there's another Christian gone down the drain?

Or, you know, and they can use all sorts of illustrations from our world and our society to talk about professing Christians who fail in the public eye, you know, and there's an article in the province this morning comparing Bill Van Der Zandt to the guy who's in prison down in the States, Jim Baker.

It's all there because there is a, there's a great desire to prove that that Christianity doesn't work. but, you see, Christianity does work and the difficulty is that our society considers the profession of faith in Christ to be a statement that I am spiritually and morally superior to the rest of you, you know, because I am a Christian and that's not the message we should get.

[22 : 39] It's not even the message we should associate with. To be a Christian is to be demoted to the point where you can see the glory of God and you can recognize who Jesus is and put your faith and trust in him.

And if you get all caught up in problems of Christian orthodoxy and Christian ethics and Christian action and Christian development and Christian power bases and Christian establishment and all those kinds of things and lose this reality, then you're in deep trouble.

You know, the, and so that, you know, I suppose, I suppose in a sense people with a personal faith in Jesus Christ almost need to keep a low profile because they're going to be gunning for you as soon as you make such a statement.

But you have to live with the contradiction as a Christian that, that you have, you have been demoted to the place where you are able to see the glory of God.

In seeing the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ, you've come to put your faith and trust in him. And having put your faith and trust in him, you, you have to let the rest of the world deal with that whatever way they want.

[24 : 03] You know, whether they use that to humiliate you or to embarrass you or to, to denigrate you, that's, that's something that happens. There's nothing, there's nothing much we can do about it.

I don't think we have to unduly expose ourselves to it, but I think it happens. But the reality on which our life is based is that, that God takes us and brings us to a place of profound repentance because we all have reason to be profoundly repentant and bring us to a place of profound repentance in that place of profound repentance to show how God is able to change water into wine is to take the worst and make the best out of it and to, to change our lives and that, that, that, that change comes through, through putting your, your personal faith in Jesus Christ and, and working with that and suffering the humiliation that you will undoubtedly suffer from if you were in our kind of world to profess that faith in Christ.

You'd be far better off to say, you know, to cuss a bit and misbehave so that nobody ever knows you're a Christian and, uh, then they'll leave you alone.

But I, uh, I don't think that that's really an acceptable way of going about it. But you, you understand what I, what I mean that, that, uh, that, uh, this, uh, the, the whole, in a sense, structure of Christianity seems to have come crashing down around our ears so that people can see what is at the heart of our Christian faith and what's at the heart of our Christian faith is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

You know, he didn't, he didn't, what he did for us, we don't have to get to the top to find out about, we have to get to the bottom to find out about. And, uh, and, uh, God in his grace is prepared to impose that kind of demotion on us so that we can get in touch with the reality, uh, that's spoken of in this story and, uh, see the glory of God and come to put our personal faith in Christ.

[26 : 16] Let me say a prayer. Father, it's cold and it's miserable and, uh, outside and, uh, all of us are deeply disturbed by the circumstances of our province and the, and the real difficulty we have with, uh, with public appearances and private realities and, uh, the contradiction, not that we see in front of us but we recognize in ourselves.

We ask that, that you will give to us as a people the great gift of repentance and in that repentance, in that demotion as it were, to find the reality of the glory of God and to come to put our faith and trust in Christ.

We ask that this may be our experience and the experience of our city. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Okay.