Our Lord’s changing of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee is both his first mighty work and one of his most remembered. What we call “miracles”, John calls “signs”. In fact, the Fourth Gospel has seven signs, this turning of water to wine being the first; the resurrection of our Lord being the seventh. Each of the seven signs invites us to see God’s work in the life of our Lord on two levels. One level is the telling of the story; the second level is the unveiling of the mystery that is the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This first sign takes place in a small Galilean village in northern Israel. Cana was not far from Nazareth, our Lord’s boyhood home. As the story begins, Jesus is at the wedding feast with his mother and some of his followers. Weddings in the first century were lengthy, days’ long events. Families would travel great distances to celebrate the wedding of two people whose lives had been pledged to each other for years, often from birth. Because weddings took up several days, planning was imperative. A crisis of embarrassing proportions shows up when the wine runs out. We’re not told whether more people showed up than expected or if guests simply were more thirsty that their hosts expected, but the hosts discover the wine is gone. The mother of our Lord learns of this faux pas and turns to Jesus: “Son, they have no wine” expecting Jesus to solve the problem. In a terse, almost rude response, Jesus says to his mother, “Woman, what is this to you and me?” In other words, he told his mother to mind her own business. The lack of wine was not their problem.

Perhaps seeing hurt in his mother’s face and then acceptance in his own, Mary commands the servants to do as Jesus instructs. John now tells us there were six large stone jars, placed where all could see them, used for the ritual washing of hands. In order to maintain religious purity, Jews carefully rinsed their hands before meals as a sign of piety. Seeing the jars, Jesus commands the servants to fill the jars with water “to the brim.” They do as our Lord commands, drawing water from a nearby well to top off these ritual vessels until they could hold no more.

“Now draw,” said Jesus, “and serve to the steward of the feast.” The servants draw water, serving it to the steward who discovers the water has become an Opus One, a Barolo or even a Brunello. Aware that this wine was not anything like the wine served earlier in the feast, the steward says, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” The evangelist finishes the story by reporting that this was “the first” of our Lord’s “signs” through which he “revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

Of all the details in this story, one simply cannot be ignored because, for the writer of the Fourth Gospel, this detail appears to be significant. When Jesus commanded the servants to fill the six stone jars with water, John remarked, “And they filled them up to the brim.” What is it about these six stone jars, filled with plain, ordinary water, that grabbed John’s attention? Remember, we read and hear these signs in John’s Gospel at two levels. What if this tiny but powerful detail in what may be our Lord’s most unusual mighty work, offers an insight into a larger world where people like you and me follow Jesus? And if it does, could this filling of water “to the brim” be a metaphor, perhaps a sign within a sign, to show us more of what it means to be Christian?

I think it does. Like every aspect of our lives 2,000 years after this water turned to wine, what is old can keep us from experiencing fully what is new. Numbers in the Bible often mean more than simply integers used in counting. Three is the number of the holy Trinity. Seven is the perfect number. Twelve represents God’s people as seen in the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Other numbers
have less noble meanings, six being the number of imperfection. Why? Because six, no matter how tall it stands or how largely it is written can never be seven. These six stone jars, used for an old religious purification ritual, even though “filled to the brim” could never be seven. Try as they could, filled with all the water they could hold, these six stone jars were and still are unable to deliver the new God was doing in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Knowing that, we read our Lord’s second command at another level: “Now draw and serve to the steward of the feast.” In the original language of the Bible, the imperative “Now draw” is the verb used almost exclusively for the drawing of water from a well.

Do you see it? The well that supplied the water filling up the six stone jars – jars used to wash dirty hands, now filled to the brim – is the same well from which the servants now draw water that becomes wine. Had the sign centered on drawing water-made-wine from those old six stone jars, the water would have eventually run out. Not now. For as long as the servants kept drawing water from the well, the wine never ran out.

What if God is showing us something vital for our lives in this New Year? 2015 may have been a very good year for you. You may have started a new business, graduated with a university degree, married the love of your life, had a baby, built a home, traveled to a wonderful place for a memorable vacation. Yes, last year could have been one of your best. But December 31st has come and gone. Last year, as good and memorable as it was for you, is over, “filled to the brim”, and can hold nothing else. Conversely, last year may have been dreadful. Last year, you were diagnosed with cancer. Last year, you lost your job or spent weeks in the hospital or saw your home burned to the ground or lost your business, your marriage, or your family. As painful as last year was, for you, last year is “filled to the brim” and deserves a quick “Good riddance!”

Today is January 17, 2016. With 16 days of the New Year behind us and 349 – being leap year – behind us – could you, would you let God draw water from the artesian well of his grace to serve you the best wine of your life? And what if you woke up every day this year and in the years yet unnumbered and unimagined before you, remembering that all that is past is now “filled to the brim”? Would you believe with me that life just might be filled with more wonder, more joy, more hope, more love? Here is the sign from a wedding in Cana of Galilee long, long ago. In the wedding of our life where the best we can do on our own is only six, Jesus shows up. Yes, Jesus shows up not so much to fix what is broken in our lives but to draw from the unending well of his grace and mercy the new wine of life only he can give. Like you, my life up to this moment is “filled to the brim.” All that follows can be new: new wine, new joy, new life because Jesus is here. Thanks be to God! Not so much for good wine, but for the well!