So, which little hamster would you rather be? Because I’m guessing that you’ve been sitting here for at least the past half hour trying to figure it out. Would you rather be the hamster on the wheel that is spinning, or the hamster on the wheel that is still? And, even more to the point, which hamster are you right now?

This past week, I was searching for an image to insert into the bulletin cover that would represent the Season of Epiphany, which isn’t easy to do. Because the word “epiphany” means “to appear upon.” We use it in reference to the birth of Jesus because, when the three wise men arrived in Jerusalem, the real presence of God appeared upon the child in the manger. We also use it in reference to the baptism of Jesus because the Holy Spirit appeared upon him like a dove. In both cases, the event was an epiphany – something holy that couldn’t be seen before but was suddenly apparent for everyone to see. So as I scanned through Google images, I was looking for an image that would represent an appearance, a face, a realization, an epiphany.

Then I spotted the hamsters. “That is such a cute and whimsical cartoon,” I thought, “certainly something that we would never put on our bulletin cover.” But the more I looked at it, the more compelling it became. Two hamsters on a wheel – two completely different lifestyles which, when you think about it, represent the choice we have to make every day between running around and sitting still.

Of course, at first I didn’t get it. I didn’t understand why one of the hamsters was just sitting there while the other one was running on the wheel. Why wouldn’t he get up and do the same thing? After all, that’s what a wheel is for. Hamsters need to run, and a wheel is the perfect mechanism for allowing them to get the exercise they need while still confining them to a cage. And while we humans aren’t confined to cages, clearly we were born to run. The human spirit needs to be on a wheel so we can discover our gifts, and stretch our horizons, and tap into our potential. If nothing else, we need to utilize our God-given ability to multi-task. The idea that anyone would sit still on a wheel and watch someone else run seemed ludicrous to me. So I actually started to root for the other hamster. “C’mon, little guy, get up and run! You can do it! Twenty minutes a day is all you need. Pump those muscles; get that blood flowing!” But it didn’t work. He just kept sitting there on that wheel.

So, in an effort to understand the meaning of this cartoon, I started reading the website that it was on. The article that went along with the cartoon was about the benefits of journaling – of recording the events of one’s day in a way that begins to take on new meaning over time. The fourth point on the page said this: “Sometimes I find it necessary to ‘line up all my little hamster wheels in a row.’ Meaning, I number everything that is on my mind at the moment. I call these thoughts hamster wheels, because they go round and round, expending enormous amounts of precious energy, but never getting ANYWHERE!”

Oh!!! Now I get it. The one little hamster that is running ‘round and ‘round all day isn’t exercising, or multi-tasking, or tapping into his potential. He’s spinning his wheels. I know that expression well because I use it all the time when I’m trying to complete a task but not getting anywhere. “I’m just spinning my wheels,” I will say. That hamster thinks he’s busy, and I’m sure he feels good about what he is doing. He’s working hard to get to the place where he wants to go, which must be very, very far away because he’s been running for a while now and still isn’t there. But what a hard worker he is; what an overachiever he is; what a successful little hamster he must be. When everyone else has given up, he’s still hanging in there, putting one foot in front of the other, confident that he’ll get ahead.

How you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like, if you just keep at it, the door will open and the future will be bright? Last weekend during the Tri-Board Retreat, I began with the question, “What kind of a church are we?” We listed all kinds of words on a flip chart that describe who we are as a church. Two of the
words were “hard-working” and “committee-oriented.” Round and round we go, running all day long on the wheel and getting nowhere. But it feels good while we’re doing it, doesn’t it? Because that’s the kind of people we are. Think about this: when someone asks you, “How was your weekend?” how do you typically respond? “It was great!” And then you list all the things you did – we went for a walk, cleaned the house, paid some bills, did the laundry, met up with some friends, went to a movie, watched TV, went to a game with the kids. “We were so busy, and had such a good time.” But imagine if the other person responded by saying: “I didn’t anything this weekend. All I did was sit home and relax.” We would look at that person and laugh.

Well, that was my initial reaction to the little hamster who was just sitting there on the wheel. “What the heck are you doing? Get up and run!” But then I had an epiphany. I realized my compulsion for getting all my hamster wheels in a row – for expending enormous amounts of precious energy, but never getting ANYWHERE!

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of John is the famous story of Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana when he turned the water into wine. Typically, when we read this story, we see it as a demonstration of his divinity – the fact that he was more than human because he could do something that a human can’t do. We run around in circles and spin our wheels, wishing that we could take the ordinary water of our lives and turn it into something holy. If only my house, my job, my marriage, my life were better. If I just keep working hard enough, things will start to improve. Meanwhile, the other little hamster is sitting on his wheel, laughing at us. Because, even though he’s been sitting all day while we’ve been running around, he’s in the exact same place as us. Both of those hamsters are at the bottom of the wheel. Neither of them have gotten anywhere.

The theme for last weekend’s Tri-Board Retreat was “Who are we as a church, where are we going, and how are we going to get there.” I know many people showed up hoping that we would talk about some specifics. Identify a problem, come up with a plan, implement a solution, and move on from there. But that, I suggested, would be spinning our wheels. Because we aren’t hamsters, are we? We are children of God. And we aren’t called by God to run in place all day, regardless of how good it may make us feel. We are called to sit still and wait upon the Lord. That may seem counter-intuitive to us, but that’s exactly the point. The point is that the wedding guests didn’t turn the water into wine, did they? The wedding steward didn’t turn the water into wine, did he? The mother of Jesus didn’t turn the water into wine, did she? Jesus turned the water into wine, and Jesus can turn us into vessels that are blessed.

The truth is that I’m not like that little hamster who runs on the wheel all day long. That’s only the part of me that you see – the part that is responsible for coming into work, running the church, and getting things done. And there’s always something to be done, isn’t there? There’s always another sermon or prayer or note to write; another visit or phone call to make; another meeting or activity to attend. That’s why so many ministers become burned out – because they never stop running on the wheel. The part of me, however, that you don’t see is the way I spend my weekends. I sit and wait upon the Lord. That’s not to say that I don’t do other things. But those other things are always secondary instead of primary; optional instead of compulsory; suggested instead of required. Because the only thing that is required of us is “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8). All we can do is show up at the wedding banquet with hearts that are humble and minds that are open. But when we do that, God takes the water of our ordinary lives and turns it into something holy.

So let me ask you the question again: Which little hamster would you rather be – the one on the wheel that is spinning, or the one on the wheel that is still? And, even more to the point, which hamster are you right now? If you’ve been spinning your wheels and getting nowhere, you’re not alone. There’s a whole community full of people out there who have been doing the same thing. And you know how the saying goes: “What’s the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” If you don’t want different results, don’t worry. You’re on the right track. But if something in your life needs to change – if you’re searching for something that you can never quite find – then you may want to sit still for a while and wait upon the Lord. You may want to stop running so much and take some time to just look around. You’ll end up in the exact same spot as the other little hamster – at the bottom of the wheel. But instead of spinning your wheels and getting nowhere, you’ll end up having an epiphany. I have no idea what that epiphany will be; that’s between you and God. But I do know this: Jesus saved the best wine for the wedding guests, and he’s saving the best for you. Amen.