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“When the Wine Runs Out”

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2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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John 2:1–12; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11

People were gathered at the wedding reception. The vows of commitment had been offered, the rites and prayers of the ceremony were concluded, and the party had begun. The bride looked beautiful; the groom looked nervous, but he was loosening up now. The mothers wiped tears from their eyes. The fathers looked uncomfortable with all the emotions of the event, so they were over in the corner talking about the upcoming playoff game.

It is not clear whose fault it was when it happened. Maybe more guests came than had RSVP'd. Perhaps folks were just drinking more than anyone expected. The father of the bride might have attempted to cut costs by under-ordering on the drinks. It could have been someone's fault or no one's fault, but it happened. The wine ran out.

Now if the wine runs out when the party is winding down and folks are heading out the door, this would not be much of a crisis.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at the event, and she perceived that the lack of wine was a crisis. She knew the people involved. She must have cared deeply about them. Perhaps she could already hear the gossiping among the neighbors: “Did you know they ran out of wine in the middle of the wedding reception? Well, you know how tight Fred is with his money. You would think that this one time he could go all out for his daughter. Did you hear about the tension between the in-laws at the wedding rehearsal? This marriage is already on the rocks...”

Jesus and his disciples were also in attendance. Mary found Jesus at the reception, and whispered in his ear, “They have no more wine.” And Jesus responded the way many adult children would respond to an intrusive mother: “Why is that your problem and why are you making it my problem? I am not the one responsible here.” Of course that was true. Jesus wasn’t hosting this wedding and neither was his mother; they were merely guests. The families of the bride and groom should have planned properly, and Jesus was under no obligation to bail them out.

And Mary, in a way that only a mother can do who has been rebuffed by her adult son, ignores it. Turning to a waiter, she instructs, “Do whatever he tells you to do.”

Mary proposed no solution to the problem. Jesus and his disciples could have dismissed themselves early from the festivities and relieved some of the burden of the crowd not having drink. They could have fanned out across the neighborhood in a search to gather more wine.

Instead, Jesus commands the servants to fill the large empty vessels outside the door with water. It is an odd request. The water from these vessels was used for religious rites of purity. By washing in this water, persons were cleansed from daily defilements with the world and restored to the community of family and faith.

The symbol of water is used by many religions. Christians understand that the waters of baptism reflect cleansing and admission into the community of faith. Water establishes identity; it marks a person as part of the family and designates to whom we belong.

One of the realities about establishing an identity is that it requires boundaries of some type. A great human propensity is for us to use boundaries to distinguish, and then to segregate and isolate. Anything or anyone that grants admission soon becomes a gatekeeper. It allows some people in, and it keeps other people out.

Those vessels of water stood as gatekeepers to distinguish those who could enter and those who did not belong.

Jesus asks that these stone vessels be refilled with water. After doing so, the servants brought some of the water to the sommelier at the feast. He declared that the really good wine was just now being served. The water had turned to excellent wine.

This story is not about how God rescues folks from social embarrassment. It is not even about the interaction between Jesus and his mother, and how that parallels our own human relationships. No, this story is about the surprising life that Jesus brings when divisions that keep people apart are dismantled.

Jesus replaces a symbol of admission that can become a symbol of exclusion. Displaced is that which distinguishes between the insiders and outsiders. In its place Jesus provides wine, fine wine, the best wine. Wine is joyful life that embraces all.

John, the gospel writer, provides some keys to help his readers properly understand the story.

What does the very first line of the story say? “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana...” First it takes place at a wedding. Weddings are the symbol of the Messianic Age when God’s realm is complete. And of course the significance of the “third day” is that Jesus rose from the dead. The gospel writer wants the reader to know that this is a story about resurrection life!

What miracle does Jesus perform? He changes ordinary water into the best of wines. Wine is a symbol of deep import in the New Testament. The communion cup is a cup of wine. This is the cup of the new covenant in our Lord’s blood, poured out for you and me and our world, so that we might have... what? New life.

God’s agenda for humanity in Jesus Christ is that God has reached out to us, beyond our expectations and beyond the bounds of propriety, beyond our knowing, beyond the community standards that may exclude. God gives in its place the very best of life.

The story of the wedding at Cana is about life, new life, even in the midst of the crises that bedevil us. This story is about the unwarranted grace of God that comes in the midst of our depletion and poverty, and surprisingly fills us with both a quantity and quality of life we could never expect.

This story is about what happens when the wine runs out. And you and I know what it's like when the wine runs out, don't we?

The door shut behind him. His briefcase felt heavier than usual. Some of the young bucks were gathered over at the coffee maker talking about last night's TV shows. Mrs. Campbell was busying herself with files at the cabinet, and he caught her glance as he headed for the elevator. She had been his assistant for 5 years, and they had already said their goodbyes.

She put down the files, and when she gave him a hug, he could see that the corner of her eyes were moist. The exchange was brief, which was a blessed relief.

The ride down the elevator was shorter than he expected, and when the doors opened, there was Charlie, standing at the entrance where he had been greeting employees and directing visitors for 15 years. When Charlie saw him, he shouted out in his usual upbeat tone, "Have a good one, Mr. Smith!" He nodded his head to Charlie, took a deep breath, sighed, and then headed for the large glass doors for the last time.

He had entered and exited these doors for almost a quarter of a century. He had invested in the corporate culture, climbed the organizational ladder, enjoyed the business expansion phase, put in the late and early hours, and now it was over. At 53, what was he going to do? What do you do when the wine runs out?

The woman looked out the window as she put down her coffee cup. The house was silent, her son at school. The dishes needed cleaning and laundry was piling up. The energy she needed was absent. It had been a month since he had left, but in reality, he had been gone for years.

She had worked to pay the bills while he made his way through medical school and residency. When their son was born, his medical practice was getting off the ground so she quit her job outside the home to devote attention to domestic responsibilities. The picture of the three of them that stood in the corner of the desk across the room was an eternity ago, she thought.

Shattered were all her assumptions about how life was going to be, about a larger family, about financial security, about growing old with someone with whom she had spent the years. She wondered why she didn't insist on getting help when there might have been an opportunity to fix things. What do you do when the wine runs out?

You and I know what it's like when the wine runs out.

And when the wine runs out for you and for me, we need someone to intervene on our behalf. We need someone who cares for us. Their care provides no magic to take away the pain or resolve the crisis. But they love us enough to whisper into the ear of One who, in ways completely unknown and surprising to us, offers a grace in our brokenness, and a fuller, meaningful life.

If the wine has run out for you, if you are wondering where to turn next, if you are in the earshot of this message, it is not by accident that you are here today. There are people whom God has called within this place to stand with you and hold you and intervene on your behalf. Grab someone here and ask for help.

When we are honest with ourselves, hasn't the wine has run out for all of us? And in those moments, someone has been a conduit of God's love and grace to us.

We don't often think about the role we can play to bring God's life to others. The Apostle Paul writes, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given wise words, to another is given knowledge, to another faith, to another healing."

If you turn to the left and you turn to the right, all around you, you will find gifts, gifts of people who are there for us, for the common good. We may not know them

beyond a nodding acquaintance, and because of that we are impoverished in a surplus of wealth.

I suspect most of you don't believe it, but indeed you are a gift and within you are gifts to be used to encourage the church, and to reach out in love to others. You may not believe you have any special talents or capacity to make any difference, but let me suggest that you might be wrong!

God doesn't need fine porcelain or golden bowls; just an empty stone vessel will do. God can fill it with life to share with others. At the wedding reception, Mary made a difference by the simple act of catching the ear of Jesus and interceding in the midst of a crisis. Can't you and I do that?

This weekend we celebrate one who was gifted with faith and wisdom, and who used his gifts for the benefit of the world.

In the midst of a system of oppression and poverty, God forged a man named Martin Luther King, Jr., and he inspired and raised the conscience of a nation.

It was King who said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

It was King who said in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant."

It was King who, upon learning that threats had been made on his life, said, "If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive." It is beyond my ability to understand how a man steeped in a culture of oppression and prejudice and hate could be a conduit of such love and new life and hope.

Most of us may not believe we possess the intellectual rigor or the passion of commitment or the opportunity to make such a difference. Did you know that the wine ran out for Martin Luther King, Jr.?

The recently released movie *Selma* depicts the pressures on King as a preacher, pastor, husband and father, strategist, and leader of a movement: Four young girls had been killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham by white supremacists. King's recent attempts to establish voting rights for blacks had failed. Other civil rights organizations and leaders criticized King and advocated more forceful approaches to bring about change. Cracks were forming in the foundation of his marriage.

There is a scene where King, late at night, is feeling the weight on his shoulders. He picks up a phone and dials a number. A woman at the other end of the line is awakened and answers. King says, "I need to hear a word from the Lord." And the woman moves to another room, and begins to sing. "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home."

In those dark moments when the wine ran out for Martin Luther King, Jr., people around him interceded, people encouraged, people confronted him with the truth, and they wouldn't back down because they loved him too much, and they knew too much was at stake. "We've come too far to go back now."

There was a community of people, salt of the earth people, who God used along with Martin Luther King, Jr., until such a moment that a vintage of life beyond imagination began pouring out of those stone vessels of segregation and racism. And when the wine began spilling out, freedom and new life marked a people long oppressed, and doors of the wedding feast would never be shut for anyone again.

Don't believe for a moment that you have nothing to offer or that somehow you are too broken for God to use.

The gifts God has placed within you are never inconsequential in the hands of God. Ministries of compassion and faith and wisdom and intercession that you offer make a difference. You see, we never know how God might take those for whom the wine has run out, and make of them a wellspring of life to others in this world.