

Water and Wine

Meno Mennonite Church

January 26, 2020

Purpose: To look to God as the source of grace and blessing in our lives, especially with the unexpected gift of good things when we find ourselves most thirsty.

Message: It is when we find ourselves most lacking that God intervenes with the unexpected grace of provision beyond expectation.

Scripture Text: John 2:1-11 (Sermon Text—I will read), Isaiah 62:1-5 (first reading), Psalm 36:5-10

Synopsis: We all go through times in our lives where we need refreshment, we need rejuvenation, and when we feel like the promises of God are not always fulfilled. We have expectations to keep, obligations to be met, and a schedule of things to do that is beyond what we feel is possible. God turns the water of our everyday, boring lives, the realities of finding resources that we often don't feel that we have into the fine wine and hope of meeting us where we need God's grace and God's transforming hand the most. It is where we least expect grace and strength that we find God's transforming work in the abundance of God's provision.

John 2:1-11 ^{NRS} **John 2:1** On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, "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." ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:1-11

On the third day
there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee,
and the mother of Jesus was there.

² Jesus and his disciples
had also been invited to the wedding.

³ When the wine gave out,
the mother of Jesus said to him,

"They have no wine."

⁴ And Jesus said to her,
"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?
My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother said to the servants,
"Do whatever he tells you."

⁶ Now standing there
were six stone water jars
for the Jewish rites of purification,
each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

⁷ Jesus said to them,
"Fill the jars with water."
And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸ He said to them,
"Now draw some out,
and take it to the chief steward."
So they took it.

⁹ When the steward tasted the water
that had become wine,
and did not know where it came from
(though the servants who had drawn the water knew),
the steward called the bridegroom

¹⁰ and said to him,
"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."

¹¹ Jesus did this,
the first of his signs,
in Cana of Galilee,
and revealed his glory;
and his disciples believed in him.

They have no wine. They have no wine. You can imagine the whispers within the crowd. Sure; the party was loud and well underway, but the prospect of running dry was the unthinkable. In a culture where even the pagans found it necessary to name a god of their pantheon to be in charge of the basic drink of life and living—the only drink that was actually fully known to be safe to drink in that day and age. Think Dionysus or Bacchus—the guys in their respective cultures were responsible to keep the wine flowing that all good things from there could come. But for the Hebrew family whose responsibility it is to host the celebration of a wedding, often the groom's family, it was no less than the family honor at stake. They have no wine means that they are standing on the rim of disaster; that the way things are simply are not, cannot continue. All of this in a culture where marriage and giving in marriage was the social grease that moved many wheels. When you run out of wine, when you bring the party to an unnatural halt, you are hitting rock bottom.

I begin here not to geek out about the classics or notions from Roman history and ancient near east wedding customs—though I could at length, but let's skip that. Often, I think this is one of those stories that we come to with a skeptical and somewhat jaundiced eye. It's a miracle sure, but really what's the point? If we manage to reconcile ourselves with Jesus and wine in the first place, getting past our tea-tootling expectation of the divine, then we need to deal with the supernatural circumstance of materials being transformed from what they were into what they are not, something which is generally not on the menu for rational western thinking. When we come to the Wedding at Cana looking to make sense of the first sign John gives us the Jesus is God (you know, aside from telling us so repeatedly in chapter one), it can all seem a bit heady and out there to consider. But really, I think it is just the opposite.

When you know what lays at the root of this story, we can all relate. We know the experience of running out of wine. We might be out of wine right now, if it comes to that. They have no wine. The tank is empty and the energy with which life is lived is somehow. While we may not live in the culture with the same expectations around honor and hospitality as that of the ancient near east, it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to get there and to capture the anxiousness of the moment, and the hopelessness it can cause. We can see why this would be

embarrassing. What's more, I think we know the feeling in ourselves all too well; having run out of wine.

January is a bit of a cruel month. When my life was ruled by the academic calendar, I often found myself a little bit out of sorts at this point in the year. The weeks before had been so full of promise and difference from the month before having survived the exams that proceeded the holiday had long passed. Now, Christmas break had well passed, the novelty of returning to school was gone, and reality set in. Having had time to read the syllabi outlining the requirements for the coming semester had brought me right around now to the same inescapable conclusion: I am in deep trouble, and there was no way on God's green earth that I was going to accomplish all of that in 10 short weeks. Having concluded that I was going to get run over by the train fast approaching, I invariably celebrated a couple days of panic before getting down to work. That's January. That and where I attended college and seminary in Elkhart County Indiana has the added bonus of being stuck with non-stop cloud cover from November to the middle of March, and this was not the happiest of months.

I think we are all somewhat out of wine right about now. The new year is worn in, and all the specialties of the last while have been tucked away for the year. We are now left to the ordinary life without the expectations of what is about to be and what is about to happen. We may even reach a point where we are fairly certain that God might have stayed on the mountaintop, leaving us herein the valley to fend for ourselves. During Advent and the high seasons, we readily are presented with the stories of God's movement, causing us to be attuned to the way that God is moving in our time, and our realities. We live the stories of our faith yet again, all but reciting the familiar words of Luke recounting the days of Caesar Augustus. Sometimes we keep looking for the intoxicating hand of God at work in our world and want the party to continue far beyond one season at one time. The question is asked: how are we to encounter God in the ordinariness of life, in the routines of our world and our reality? Where do we look for God when the wine of the spectacular has gone dry? Where do we look for God when we ourselves are drained?

The answer is deceptively simple: we look for it, and we expect it. I think that this is some of what we can glean from this miracle. Yes; John is telling us about Jesus and offering evidence of who this is, but he is also talking about God. No small affair of a couple of hours, some catering, and baby pictures, weddings were the chance for the families of the betrothed to exercise the full hospitality that the clan had to offer for all those around. This was a happening that could best be thought of as a carnival where the whole town was invited to come and participate in the celebration of the married couple for literally days on end. With the honor of the family at stake, running out of wine was far more than a violation of the Martha Stewart protocol. As was said.

It takes Jesus' mother to prompt him to act. We can almost see Jesus rolling his eyes as he explains it is not yet his time when she pulls him aside. But Mary knows. Mary knows who and what Jesus is, and is inviting Jesus to own that identity for himself. Moreover, it is a leap of faith, yes in Jesus, but also in God that a remedy for this situation was even possible to be had. Most of our miracles are the big gestures of God with us applies not only to angels and magi, but also to the ordinariness of the day to day as well. Mary looks for the way of God, and expects to find it, and is not disappointed. Jesus uses ordinary materials of an ordinary household—the water of everyday living in the vessels of everyday piety, and through them does something extraordinary, and visits the world-altering power of God into the situation where it was least expected. The ordinary realities of the household are brought into contact with the hand of God, and the routine items are transformed, not just to wine, but the finest wine that had yet been served. God breaks in through the ordinary, smallness of a potentially embarrassing situation, and provides the wine, provides what is needed when it is needed, extending grace where it is least expected.

How much of God do we miss I wonder because we simply do not expect God to be where we conclude God cannot be? Often we are faced with situations and circumstances that while desperate either seem so far out of anyone's control that we don't particularly expect God to show up along the way, or that are so completely, well, blah and ordinary that we stop expecting God to come and be here for the boring bits of our world. The promise of the intoxicating high points of faith is not so much that we might celebrate to the point that we

would be held over to the next spiritual high peak. Rather, it is in the high points that we are made aware that even the most basic elements of our lives are given into Jesus' hands and held in God's care, and the entire quality of our reality has changed, and are charged with the potential of the holy. God with us dwells among us, and the waters of our lives have changed. The routines of life, the commonness of causal contacts, simple acts of kindness, those things which make up our ordinary times become opportunities to have the world altering, reality reforming encounters with the wine of God's grace and God's presence to flow into our existence. God wants the celebration of life in the kingdom to continue, to enrich us in ways that we only imagine, ways that defy expectation. God has come into the world, and the waters of realities are changed, offering even more than what can be expected for even the driest areas of our lives. We are called to live our lives, tasting the waters of our ordinariness, all the time anticipating, even on the most basic level something we might not have tasted before; the in breaking of God love and God's grace, the wine that buoys the celebration along.

We are called not just to live in the ordinariness of our lives, but to live as a continuation of celebration God's life-giving action in the world. God gives what we need, even when we are left feeling little else but a want of refreshment. May our waters be forever changed, forever sustained with the sweetness of the God whose provision surpasses every expectation. And may we have the palate to taste the wine of God's presence even in the most ordinary days of our lives.

