

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday January 20, 2019
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
John 2 Wedding Feast at Cana
Title: When the Wine Gives Out?

Jesus, his mother and his disciples are partying at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee when tragedy strikes, "The wine gives out." Well, ok, it's not a life-or-death tragedy, but a social tragedy for the newly married couple and their families. One wonders if Jesus and his friends who were invited are partially responsible for the wine running out?

"When the wine gave out" is an evocative phrase. The party is in danger of coming to a desiccated halt. The rejoicing of those at this feast is about to end. The maidens will soon cease their dancing. The merriment of old and young alike is about to be interrupted. Yet, I wonder if this phrase can be heard in a more personal way. Could this wedding feast be our lives? How like our lives at times is this phrase, "When the wine gave out?" Have you ever felt like the feast that is your life is running on empty? Are you tired, weary, exhausted, drained, at a loss for inspiration? Perhaps the story of the wedding feast is about something deeper and more contemporary than a young couple in a little-known village in Galilee long ago? Perhaps the crisis of this story is closer to us than we imagined?

At least one person in the family is concerned for the young couple and their feast, Jesus' mother who enlists a reluctant Jesus into the crisis of the story. Jesus' response to his mother is barely respectful. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." In the Greek, Jesus evidently sounds odd, distant toward his mother and strangely like a sullen teenager. The passage is cryptic and veiled. Is it too early for Jesus to begin his public ministry? It is the wrong time for an epiphany? In John's gospel we are given only a very few "signs" that point us toward the revelation of Jesus as the glory of God.

Jesus' mother is not deterred. She instructs the servants to simply, "Do whatever he tells you." Ponder this phrase for a moment: "Do whatever he tells you." As John frames it, in all of its odd simplicity, from the mouth of Mary comes a command for the ages, "Do whatever he tells you." This command is much more than instructions to the servants. It is clearly the essence of discipleship, "Do whatever he tells you." This is an invitation to seek life at its source, for in this gospel Jesus is the source of new life, "whoever hears my word and believes has eternal life (John 3:36, 5:24)." In a strange way the point of the story is already clear: "When the wine gives out, do whatever Jesus tells you."

Yet the miracle and wonder are still ahead. We are not told what urges Jesus into action. Jesus uses what is at hand, six stone jars for purification rites. They are not wine vessels but rather stone vessels used to hold water to wash the feet and hands of dusty travelers. It is no small task to fill these containers. It would have required a great deal of water hauling. A hundred and fifty gallons would have provided a large amount of "good wine" for a party already in progress. Whatever Jesus is doing it is not a small thing.

His instructions are simple, "Fill the jars with water." We are told they filled them to the brim and did as Jesus instructed drawing some out and taking it to the chief steward. All of this, of course, makes perfect sense in the flow of the story, but this is not a Fiji Water® commercial. Only when we are told that the steward tasted the water that had become wine do we understand that something miraculous has taken place. Time begins to swirl, when did it become wine? Did the servants know? Where has this good wine come from? Minds are stretched, who is this one who makes new wine, this Jewish Dionysius? Life is renewed, the party continues, and best is saved for last. The stone jars holding water for the ancient rites are used to deliver the new wine of a new time and a new relationship. And where there is great love there are always miracles. Jesus' purpose is to bring divine abundance into human lack.

In this simple but disarming story of Jesus saving a young couples' beginning from public embarrassment and shame the glory of God is seen. Who is this master of the revels who gives new life to the nuptial celebration? Who is this wonder-worker who reverses the order of things, providing the best vintage after the party is in full swing?

No one speaks ill of water in the deserts of the Middle East, or New Mexico for that matter. Living in dry country we know the blessing of water and the deep symbolism of thirst and its refreshment, of rivers and streams making glad a landscape, of rain blessing the earth. Its preciousness is defining, its abundance rare. Similarly, wine was not something that everyone had and drank freely. It was a cash crop for the wealthy. The poor drank little wine, ate less meat and quenched their thirst with water. But at a wedding or other large family celebration it was different. Families would save and sacrifice to do it up right. Family and friends passed harsh judgments on those who could not host a wedding in style and abundance. No expense was to be spared. Meat of all kinds was served in abundance and wine flowed freely. In our story it is not that water is looked down upon, but rather that wine is most fitting for the occasion.

As Frederick Buechner writes, "Wine is booze, which means it is dangerous and drunk-making. It makes the timid brave and the reserved amorous. It loosens the tongue and breaks the ice especially when served in a loving cup. It kills germs. As symbols go, it is a rather splendid one (Wishful Thinking, p. 96)."

Water turning into wine is powerfully symbolic. Some rabbinic writings set the water of this age against the wine of the future. And often, eschatological writings envision the hoped-for age-to-come as flowing with an abundance of wine.

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear [...] and he will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25:6)."

The wedding feast at Cana is the first story of a new age. In the person of Jesus, God is doing something new, but it is hidden to all but a few at this telling. The miracle of water into wine is kept from the crowd. They continue to celebrate clueless of the strange and

wonderful work done behind the scenes. The event is faith-producing in the small circle of Jesus' mother and his disciples but for others it was simply the best wedding feast in recent memory.

What is this story telling us? In a wonderfully disarming way, I believe this story tells us that Jesus is the life of the party. When your wine has run out, it is Christ who comes near, it is Christ who presides over the refilling of our lives, it is Christ who can once again gladden our hearts and bring us back into life. To be sure we must respond and "do whatever we hear Jesus ask of us:" love your enemy, forgive one another from the heart, show compassion, do justice, pray without ceasing, live simply, be generous, be vulnerable, seek peace, and in the midst of these practices you will discover the new wine of life, the best wine, which must be enjoyed in the midst of ordinary life. To know Jesus, to walk in his ways, is to experience the intoxicating love of God, is to be transformed, to be made new.

Yet this newness is not for some other world, it is for this one here and now, this new wine is to be carried into your present life. Yet to live this life is at times to live a life within a life. It is to embrace a life in which nothing is changed yet everything is changed. What has been water is now wine. Word has become flesh. The kingdom of God is here and now and not yet. To live in Christ is to live on the edge of a new time in the midst of this time. In this God-bearing person called Jesus, all is new. It is to know deep down that the dryness of your life can become abundant wine again in an instant if we are willing to follow in Jesus' ways. Those empty jars standing by the back door, lying around your life can become full again. And we at St. Mark's know something about new wine, new life, a new era of hope in this place as together we shaped a new community a new feast when it looked as if the wine had run out.

As I ponder this deeply mystical story of the Wedding at Cana. I wonder who's wedding feast this is? I believe this story is inviting you to your own wedding feast, the wedding feast of your soul. Jesus is the lover come to celebrate your union with God. I wonder what it will take for you to join the feast in progress? Do you sense any newness around you? Can you feel the Spirit urging you on? Are you willing to fill up the jars that are standing dark and hollow in the corner? I wonder, do you believe that water can become wine, the intoxicating wine of God's newness in your life? What will it take? Has the wine given out? Are you willing to do what ever God tells you to do?

In a few minutes the invitation to the wedding feast will be given, as you reach into heaven to receive the bread and wine of this marriage feast of your soul, as you guide the chalice of new life to your lips, taking Christ into your very core, know that newness is in the cup, newness is hidden in your very midst. Drink deep, the love and life of God. Do whatever he tells you and find life, life everlasting that you can smuggle back into the work-a-day world with you.

Hear this ancient collect and know that it is speaking to us. It is speaking to you:

Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan's waters; the magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia.

-Ancient Orthodox Collect for Epiphany