

“When The Wine Runs Out”
Sunday, January 16, 2022
John 2:1-11 & 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
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Jesus’ first sign of turning water into wine reveals the promise that when we are depleted and emptied, God will bring renewal and hope.

Most of the pastors I know will affirm that there are two essential ingredients for conducting weddings.

The first is to remember that since weddings are extraordinarily complicated concoctions mixed with an amalgamation of dozens of moving parts blended together with one part tradition and three parts emotion and a heavy splash of anxiety, funerals are often easier to lead than weddings.

The second ingredient is to remember that since if anything can go wrong it will go wrong, you need the help of a competent wedding coordinator. Thankfully, at Woodlawn Chapel and other churches I have served we have had many competent wedding coordinators. Just ask Joan Vachalek about some of the weddings we have hosted.

Weddings are generally highly combustible events. It’s like carrying a nuclear bomb on a roller coaster. A wedding coordinator provides the backstage coordination that allows a complex, 200 guest, 16-member bridal party with a highly anxious bride and an over-controlling mother of the bride to go seamlessly. The woman who taught me all of this died last year at the wonderful age of 103. I have told the story about my friend Jessie many times, and yet the story, like fine wine, only improves with age.

Jessie was not the mother of Jesus, but she was venerated by many as if she were. She carried herself with elegantly cloaked authority, and few questioned her instructions. As wedding coordinator at the church, she was an institution who executed weddings with precision and organization. She was the commander in heels.

She began her rehearsals with a review of her rules, which included strict prohibitions against drinking before the ceremony. Jessie delivered her

instructions with the precision of a drill sergeant. It was not that Jessie had anything against drinking, but was nonetheless strictly a puritan when it came to decorum at church. Any lapse in protocol resulted in her ire.

At one wedding, she pulled me aside shortly before the organist began the prelude. She opened her purse and pulled out a large bottle of expensive Scotch. “Where did you get that?” I asked. “Out of the groom’s dressing room! Now I’m going to the bride’s dressing room to see if I find anymore.” I laughed and then noticed the rather sheepish-looking groom. He knew he’d been caught.

The wedding went fine, and everyone left happy – a few days later, I saw Jessie and asked what she had done with the liquor. “Well, I did the only thing one could do under the circumstances,” she said. “I took it home and poured myself a drink!”

Jesus was not blessed with a wedding coordinator at Cana, but then he was only a guest. As far as he was concerned, Jesus was there to catch up with old friends and enjoy the party, which according to custom had been going on for days. Weddings in Biblical times included extended days of celebration and were managed by protocols that would give Buckingham Palace a run for their money. Brides and Grooms wore crowns and brightly decorated robes and received guests for days.

Running out of a wine was more than a minor social faux pas. It was as unthinkable as sneaking a bottle of whiskey into a Presbyterian Sunday school room. Keeping guests satisfied was an inviolable promise. When it looked like the celebration was running dry, Mary took action.

“They’re out of wine,” she tells him. Jesus seems to shrug his shoulders as if to say, “Not my problem.” For whatever reason, however, Jesus doesn’t turn away. I like to think that even Jesus knew what happens when you call your mother, “Woman.”

It is not yet “his time.” But Mary believes it is indeed his time.

It’s hard to say why Mary decided to intervene, especially since she only makes two appearances in John’s Gospel, here and again at the crucifixion.

Perhaps she caught Jesus red-handed as a teenager when he is showing off for a few of his friends. More likely, however, more aligned with John's theology, she knew what only a Mother would know: Jesus was her son, yes, but also the Son, of God, God in flesh. With Jesus, there will always be enough. In fact, as John will tell us time and time again, with Jesus there will always be more than enough: there will be living water, and no one will ever thirst; there will be bread and fishes for those who hunger, and even more; there will be light shining in the darkness. Jesus comes to bring life, and it will be abundant.

This is what Mary knows about Jesus, and it is something we ought to remember. John's gospel refers to miracles as signs, and this is the first sign that John shows us. While Matthew, Mark and Luke all present a variety of miracles, John only offers a few signs. Each sign points to another aspect of Jesus' identity.

It seems strange that John would start the gospel with Jesus doing something relatively pedestrian as turning water into wine. Comparatively speaking, this is a miracle of little consequence: no one is pulled from a rolling storm, no one is healed, no one eyes are opened, no one is raised from the dead.

Even Jesus seems to brush this off. But Mary turns to the servants, and tells them, "Do whatever he tells you." And when the wine steward walks by the humongous jugs of ritual water, he notices the aroma of fine wine. This is not Three Buck Chuck! This is fine, vintage Philippe Petite Rothchild! Why has the host saved the best for the last?

Fine wine, produced in exceptional abundance, a sign of God's abundant, joyful life made incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is a sign that with Jesus, there will always be enough.

This sign – this first miracle – points beyond the little village of Cana, beyond this couple's celebration, beyond Palestine. This first sign reminds us of God's abundance, the joyful salvation God is bringing to all people. Wine is a powerful symbol throughout scripture. The gift of God's justice and salvation, says Amos, will be seen when "the mountains shall drip sweet wine." Isaiah calls out the feast of all God's people which shall include fine foods and well-aged wines. The abundance that God provides is a gift that arrives with pure joy.

All who taste this wine will marvel. “You’ve saved the best for last,” the steward tells the astonished host. He points to the hundreds and hundreds of gallons of new wine, sparkling with life.

It seems Jesus has replenished that which has been drained from us.

How many times have you gotten up in the morning, poured cereal in a bowl, only to find that there are two drops of milk left in the jug? You shake it, you squeeze the bottle, anything to get something more than an eyedropper of milk?

There is something in that experience that reminds us of the painful experiences of life. We rise in the morning, always reminded of complications and struggles. We work hard – so very hard –and we return home depleted. We juggle multiple expectations, and likely a few fall through our hands. We bear deep wounds of grief. We may not feel as though Jesus’ promise of abundant life has any real value.

When the pitcher runs dry, we must believe that God will give what we need, and there will be enough. When the hope of people is wrangled away, they need to know: there will be enough.

It was the promise of that hope that sustained and fueled a young preacher from Montgomery, Alabama into the national spotlight whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. At 25, Martin Luther King, Jr., held a doctorate in theology from Boston University and was called as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery. He arrived as the city and the nation was being held accountable for centuries of racist policies. Dr. King knew what it meant to find that the barrels that held freedom’s promises had been drained dry. But he trusted that with Jesus, there will always be enough.

When faced with a crisis, our fears say to us, “What if there won’t be enough?” When life’s obstacles force us to drink everything out of the pitcher, even when there’s only a few drops, we say, “There isn’t enough.”

It happens. It happens to all of us, even to preachers.

Some years ago, at a Session meeting here we were wrestling with some problem – I can't remember what it was, but it was certainly wrapped around whether or not we had enough money, or enough volunteers, or enough people. The discussion went back and forth when finally, one of the "elders," a young boy who was then a sophomore in high school looked at us and said, "But aren't we a church?"

Aren't we a church? Aren't we the people whom God has loved? Aren't we the ones who have seen water turned into wine, time and time again? Aren't we the ones, like the disciples, who have seen Jesus' glory and believed in him? My friends: it may appear that Jesus' time has not yet come, but I will tell you: there will be enough.
Amen.