

“Listen to the Man: When the Wine Runs Out”

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

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Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

Our first scripture lesson is from the book of the prophet Isaiah, the 62nd chapter beginning with the first verse. But first, let me say a word or two about its context. Scholars increasingly believe that this portion of the book was written some time after the people had returned from exile in 538 BC. They were back in their land, they had seen the Babylonians defeated, but they had grown weary of all the effort required for restoration. It seemed like a lot of hard work that wasn't paying off. There were still threats to the nation's security, still huge challenges to be overcome. Doubts were beginning to arise about the credibility of God's promises, God's ability to protect and redeem them. Listen to how Isaiah tries to quell those doubts by affirming that the people will one day be vindicated - that they shall have a new name. And note how he uses the imagery of marriage, describing the people and their land as a cherished bride. (Isaiah is not the only Hebrew prophet to use the metaphor of marriage to describe the relationship between God and the people, and that image will be picked up in Revelation, when John describes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband). And of course it is used by Jesus, who more than once describes the kingdom of God in terms of a wedding feast - and will inaugurate his ministry in John's gospel by going to a wedding. Listen now for God's word in the book of Isaiah. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our second passage for today comes from the second chapter of John's gospel. As you know, John is very different than the other three canonical gospels. It begins with a lofty prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...", and then it moves on to show John baptizing in the wilderness. John points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, and the Son of God, and then four disciples encounter him - Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael. So far in John's gospel, Jesus has done no real teaching or healing.

This brings us to our text, which details the very first public act of Jesus' ministry in John, which is not to teach or to heal; it is to perform a miracle at a wedding. The author of John calls it the first of Jesus' signs. As you hear this text, you should be aware of a few things. First, when Jesus addresses his mother as Woman rather than Mother that would not have been considered all that unusual in the context of that particular culture. Second, when Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come," he means by "my hour" the event of his being lifted up on the cross in crucifixion. And third, know that to run out of wine at a wedding, then as well as today, would have been a terrible embarrassment for the host. Listen for God's word in the gospel of John. *Read John here.*

I love weddings! I love to officiate at them. I cherish the opportunity of getting to know a couple in premarital counseling, the chance to reflect on scripture and dispense a few final words of advice and inspiration to them and their guests on their big day, and the privilege of pronouncing that the couple is now husband and wife. I love the atmosphere around most weddings, which is typically so full of joy and hope and promise for the future. And I do enjoy being at the reception, as those of you who have seen me cut a rug with Judith or dance with my daughters can attest. I will never forget hearing someone say, as Judith and I were leaving Brad and Mandy Conner's wedding reception several years ago, "I've never seen a preacher who was such a good dancer." (Now I realize that not everyone would agree with that assessment, or even take it as a compliment, but it made me feel good anyway).

Dancing or not, weddings are meant to be joyous, celebratory occasions. They represent the inauguration of something new, the formation of a new family, and the promise of a future of faithfulness. This may be why John's gospel has Jesus first public act of ministry be attending a wedding with his disciples and then doing his part to make sure the festivities continued unabated. It makes sense that Jesus would start there.

By the time Jesus came along, marriage had been used as a metaphor for God's relationship with the people for hundreds of years. So in the synoptic gospels, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as being like a wedding feast. And in John, he kicks off his ministry by attending one. This is Jesus inaugurating a new era in God's relationship with the world.

But there is something about talking about a wedding today that just doesn't feel quite right. When you think about some of what has happened in the world and in our community the past week, it feels a little unseemly to be talking about a wedding feast. Earlier this week, a monster earthquake devastated Haiti, the poorest country in this hemisphere and initial estimates suggested that well over 100,000 people were killed. There are still bodies buried underneath the rubble.

Some of us were in attendance at Rabbi Dick Sternberger's funeral at Temple Rodef Shalom. And though by all accounts he lived life fully and to the age of eighty-three, our grief was real, in part because it seemed like there was so much more that a man filled with such joy and vigor could accomplish, especially when he was such a leader at Chesterbrook Residences.

Others of us have loved ones who are terribly sick, perhaps terminally so. There are troubled family relationships, stressful work situations, and economic pressures. The animosity and divisions we see in the world has not disappeared, whether it be between late night talk show hosts, nations, or ethnic groups. In this context, it doesn't seem quite right to be talking about a wedding.

But it is not just Jesus attendance at a wedding that is important, but what he does there that matters: he turns water into wine. You see, the "hook" in the story of the wedding at Cana is that the host of the party had run out of wine. Up until that point, the party had been going smoothly. The guests were filling their plates and their bellies, the wine was flowing freely and fully, everyone was having a good time, and Jesus and his disciples were joining in the fun. It was a great party, and in that culture, it would have been going on for a number of days. But then the wine ran out. Now for the host of a party in that culture, in that day and time, that really was a crisis. He couldn't just send someone down to the Cana equivalent of Total Wine and More to pick up a few additional bottles of Pinot Noir or Cabernet. Even if he could, it would be embarrassing to acknowledge that he wasn't prepared. It would be embarrassing to admit that he didn't have enough wine in reserve.

Running out of wine was very bad news for the family hosting the wedding party. This was the biggest event in the young life of this bride and groom. Running out of wine meant the wedding planner had blown it. In the Middle Eastern culture the needs of the guest were then and are still today very important. If this disaster were discovered no one would remember the ceremony or the days of celebration that followed. All they would remember was that the wine ran out before the celebration was over. This social gaffe would be an affront to everyone. Some would interpret it as a curse on the couple's life together and perhaps a sign of trouble to come. "That marriage will never last. The wine ran out at their wedding!"

The text describes the host's predicament in four words: "the wine gave out." It goes on to describe the miracle that Jesus performs to "fix the problem," but I don't want us to go there yet. Let's stick for a time with what it is like for the wine to give out. I want us to do that by thinking of wine not in a literal sense, but in a symbolic one. Of course, in a literal sense, not everyone can or should drink wine.

Wine can enslave an alcoholic. The book of Proverbs talks about how wine is “a mocker and a brawler.” However destructive wine can be in some circumstances, the truth is that wine has, at the same time, also always been symbolic of joy and blessing, of being intoxicated by God and the life God gives. That is why I love the idea that we offer people the option of having wine instead of grape juice when we celebrate communion here at Immanuel. It’s important to also offer grape juice, I think, but something of the giddiness and joy and risk and “kick” of a life lived in devotion to God is embodied in that wine.

Scripture does not shy away from talking about wine as a metaphor for the spiritual life. When the Old and New Testaments talk about the community of faith being a vineyard called to bear good fruit, they are evoking the image of grapes which would be used for wine. Christ referred to the gospel of grace as new wine that would burst old wine skins, and when he shared a last meal with his disciples, he linked wine with his blood, which he claimed would give new life. When Pentecost arrived, and the Spirit of God descended upon the apostles gathered in Jerusalem, they were accused of being drunk on new wine. And when the apostle Paul talked about the Spirit, he talked not just in terms of the gifts of the spirit, but of the fruit of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. He tapped back into the image of the vineyard again.

Right or wrong, wine has been a symbol of joy and zest for life. In that light, I trust you will know what I mean when I say that sometimes, “*the wine gives out.*”:

The wine gives out when we lose our sense of the joy of living - or, perhaps, we realize we never had much joy in living in the first place.

The wine gives out when our days seem like an endless stream of obligations that exhaust us rather than a series of opportunities for encountering God and experiencing life.

The wine gives out when we are tired of keeping up appearances and putting on a front, when we feel depleted, like we have nothing left to give to our jobs, to our marriage, to our kids, to our lives.

I can testify that pastors are not immune to that experience. I remember a time in the first church I served when I conducted three funerals, not memorial services, in the space of little more than a week (by that I mean exactly eight days). Two of those funerals were for people to whom I had become very close. Let me tell you, for a while after that, I was, to use an old Southern expression I learned in North Carolina, “give out.”

I imagine almost everyone here has known that “give out” feeling. I’m not talking about when you realize in the middle of the party that you haven’t stocked enough libations.

You are “*give out*” when you know that the Christian life is meant to be marked by joy, but you don’t feel much joy.

You are “*give out*” when you know Christian life is meant to be marked by service, but you don’t feel much desire to serve.

You are “*give out*” when you know Christian life is meant to be marked by loving others, but you have a hard time loving the people you know, let alone the people you don’t.

You are “*give out*” when you know the Christian life is meant to be marked by hope, and about all you can feel is despair that your life or the life of a loved one, or the life of the world isn’t going the way that you wanted.

And God knows, the world IS a mess. In the face of terror threats, the earthquake in Haiti, battles over health care, and on this Martin Luther King weekend, the realization that while gains have been made in human rights around the world and civil rights in our country, there is still much to be done, it is hard not to feel give out from time to time.

So I want to draw your attention to three things that happen in today's text after Mary brings the problem that the wine has given out to Jesus' attention and then tells the servants to do what he tells them.

#1. *He takes a situation of scarcity and out of it brings abundance.* Where once there was no wine, there is now more than enough. This scarcity to abundance theme will be recur later in John's Gospel by the way, when a little boy with five loaves and two fish (but what are they among so many, the disciples say), shares his meal and Jesus, God's love embodied in the world, takes them and multiplies them into enough to feed 5,000 men, plus the woman and children who are with them. What situations like the earthquake in Haiti do is to bring out our urge to give of our loaves and fishes (and you will see on a table in Fellowship Hall sheets with a list of opportunities to make a difference in Haiti). Time and again, it has been my experience that when I bring my sense of lack, my anxiety, and my need to the God I've come to know in Jesus Christ in openness and prayer and community, I have been refilled, reenergized, and recommissioned to make a difference in the world, in my family, and in my community.

#2. *The way Jesus addresses the scarcity is by having servants fill up huge jars meant to be filled with water for ritual purification and then transforming that water.* This suggests the water of baptism for me, and the importance of remembering our baptism, remembering that we are precious to God. But notice what happens to the water that was intended to make people pure. One commentator says that the water in those jars would have been sufficient to cleanse the whole world. Notice what happens to that water - it becomes absolutely useless for that purpose. You can't wash your hands with wine. But you can use wine to loosen inhibitions. You can use it to express hospitality and welcome to others.

One of the issues that Jesus had with the religious authorities of his day was that they were busy trying to figure out who was in and who was out in God's eyes, who it was okay to associate with and who it wasn't, who was pure and who was impure, who they could eat a meal with and who they should avoid at all costs. To take stone jars filled with enough water to purify the whole world and to turn all that purifying water into the wine of welcome was to make a point, one that Jesus will live out in the way he responds to the Samaritan woman at the well, who says to him, "What have you to do with me, for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans?" The wedding miracle at Cana suggests a move from an emphasis on purity and the in-group to an emphasis on hospitality to the other. Water gets turned into wine every time we get the courage to reach across boundaries that would separate us.

#3. When the water gets turned into wine, a situation of despair gets turned in to an ongoing occasion for joy. It really is okay to be joyous, even in the face of tragedy, especially when you consider the etymology of the word used for joy. Ecstasy, literally ek-stasis, literally means to be outside of one's "settledness", outside of one's self. We'll have an opportunity to experience that next week in worship when Catherine Ayres, one of our high school youth who was confirmed here a few years ago and is in a liturgical dance troupe, will dance with her group during the anthem and the benediction response. Now I know liturgical dance is not for everyone, but when you see them dance next week, I want you to think about how water gets turned into wine, and how dance can be an expression of joy and praise.

A last word. When Jesus says, "*My hour has not yet come,*" it is his way of saying if I do this miracle now, people won't fully understand its meaning. You can only properly understand how water

gets turned into wine in light of the cross. Because looking at the cross, you can truly see how purity gives way to the open arms of hospitality, scarcity gives way to abundance, and despair gives way to joy.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt