

Westminster Sermon – “When the Wine Runs Out”

Sunday, January 16, 2022

Scripture Readings – Psalm 36:5-10, John 2:1-12

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Psalm 36:5-10, affirms God’s rich abundance to all times and places. God’s unconditional love renews and restores us, even in our lowest moments, when the wine runs out. The psalmist makes generous use of the Hebrew word *hesed*, translated in the many phrases that refer to God’s unfailing, continuing love which never runs out! May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of these ancient Hebrew scriptures.

5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. 6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. 7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. 8 They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. 9 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. 10 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Our second scripture reading is John 2: 1-12. In this story unique to John’s gospel, an interaction between Jesus and his mother at a wedding in Cana leads to events that offer a glimpse into who Jesus is and the meaning of Jesus’ ministry. What is truly amazing in this story is the abundance of wine Jesus offers. 150 gallons of the highest quality wine flowed from the six empty stone jars. Hear now God’s holy word as it is recorded in the gospel.

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. 12 After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days

The title of the sermon: "When the Wine Runs Out"

*The text: When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."
John 2:3*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, Thank you for a love that never runs out, thank you for filling our emptiness and transforming our lives time and time again. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Jewish weddings are rich with ritual. I had the privilege of co-officiating at an interfaith wedding last month in Boston when the daughter of one of Peter and my closest friends married a Jewish man and asked me to join her under the wedding canopy with her husband-to-be and his Rabbi. The four-poled canopy with open sides and a covered roof creates a small sanctuary. The space underneath is set aside as sacred to remind the couple to create sacred space every day in their relationship with each other. The breaking of the wine glass at the end of the ceremony reminds the couple of life's fragile nature and the need for healing and forgiveness in the broken places on their journey together.

Perhaps these rituals were a part of the ceremony Jesus witnessed in Cana that day. John tells us the wine was flowing freely as they celebrated this sacred beginning. Then the unspeakable happens ...the wine runs out. One can imagine this would be cause for great embarrassment. It is a social crisis if nothing more. However, in this time and culture, it this would have brought shame on the family.

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

Let's reflect for a moment on the interaction between Jesus and his mother. Over the years, preachers have interpreted the tone of Jesus' response as disrespectful, almost as if he is putting a busybody in her place. *"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?"*

This interpretation has always disturbed me. It felt like another put down to women, something too prevalent in the culture of religion. Theologian Gail O'Day notes that although these words "sound harsh to the modern ear," within the context they are "neither rude nor hostile." Jesus often referred to women as "woman" and "what concern is that to you or to me?" acknowledges the problem is not theirs to solve as guests. Mary and Jesus both understand this. It is out of genuine concern for her friend and host that Mary says anything at all to Jesus.

The interaction between Jesus and his mom reveals a relationship of respect and affection. Jesus is an adult, about to venture into his ministry. Although he listens to and respects his mother, Jesus must be guided by his inner calling from God and not by any human claim or authority. His mother understands this. In fact, this is the goal of every mother; to empower our children to make their own choices, not guided by the noise of the culture or the speech of their friends, but by their inner voice which is in tune with the loving and just God to whom they belong.

Jesus' mother instructs the servants to listen to her son, not knowing what he would do but trusting he would act from within himself...and the first sign of Jesus' ministry is recorded in the Gospel of John.

What do we do in our lives when the wine runs out? For many of us this time of the year is a time, symbolically speaking, when the pottery jars of our being are empty. In many ways the responsibilities in the new year feel daunting and the remnants of COVID continue to drain us. Simply put, many of us have run out of wine, so to speak, we are in need of replenishment.

The Book of Ecclesiastics reminds us that both abundance and emptiness are part of the fabric of the human experience and the rhythm and times of our lives. It is what makes us vulnerable, and therefore human. The preacher affirms: *...there is a time for every matter under the heavens; a time to dance and a time to mourn; a time to keep silent; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to build up and a time to break down.*

It is the ebb and flow between these times that builds character and reminds us of our dependency upon the God whose steadfast love extends to the heavens and in whom we take refuge. Often it is in our emptiness that we find the fullness of God. It is in our losing that we discover an appreciation for what we have, and it is in our brokenness that we experience God's mercy and grace. This is part of the paradox of our life together and so just when our story presents us with empty stone jars and no more wine during a sacred celebration, we witness the unthinkable, the unimaginable generosity of Jesus! The abundance and the quality of the wine transformed from the water in the purification jars, the Cana miracle, points to the unfolding story of Christ's ministry and reminds us that the Gospel does not play by the rules of our expectation.

The extravagant gift of Jesus goes way beyond meeting the needs of the moment for health, safety, or saving face. In this story, the gift encompasses the celebration of life itself. The One who is the source of life, the One whose love and mercy are beyond our comprehension, this One is in our midst quietly transforming circumstances, without drawing attention to himself. Only the servants, the disciples, Jesus' mother, and those of us who have the privilege of reading the gospel of John know what transpired at the wedding of Cana.

This weekend our country honors the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who walked with him to transform the injustice of segregation. It all began with the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955, and a courageous Rosa Parks, who metaphorically speaking had run out of wine after a long day at work and who refused to give up her seat in the first row of the colored seating to a white man when the white seating had become full.

The empty city buses on the following Monday morning symbolized the beginning of a transformation that would change the way of life in our country. A change that did not come easy, did not come without walking shoes, without great personal sacrifice, without endurance and the ability to organize, without unity of spirit and voice speaking truth to power, and without the mercy and grace of God who walked among us. We honor Dr. King, the person who inspired that transformation through his leadership, grateful for the abundance of wine that has flowed from those empty stone jars of segregation, and mindful that we still have some walking to do on the journey toward full equality.

On that journey when we are feeling empty, discouraged, like the wine has run out again, may we remember the Cana miracle, raise our glasses, replenish our spirits, and quench our thirst for justice as we join our hearts, hands, and voices in the song of liberty and dignity for all. Amen.