

New Wine

The Rev. Linda W. McFadden
First & St. Stephen's UCC, Baltimore, MD
January 17, 2010, Epiphany 2C
Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

Several days ago, I thought the sermon for today was all finished. We were going to talk about the wine of transformation and Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community. I was planning to lead into story of the wedding at Cana by mentioning some of the things that can go wrong at weddings. But suddenly something went terribly wrong in the world. The reality of the earthquake in Haiti has shouldered aside my puny plans and demands center stage in our reflections today.

The catastrophe in Haiti is a major disruption in the familiar order of the world. What can the suffering of so many people have in common with running out of wine at a wedding feast? It's true that the wedding incident was a major debacle for the host in that time and place, but really, what has a catering problem to do with human suffering on a massive scale?

If our faith and our theology are any good at all, they help us understand and live into the incomprehensible. So a starting place for dealing with Haiti in the context of scripture might be this: Whenever humans are completely at a loss as to what to do next, God unexpectedly shows up.

When the unexpected happens in the gospel story, God shows up in the form of Jesus, newly baptized. And even though dealing with this problem with the wine isn't on his agenda, either, look at what he's doing: transforming water into superb wine. This disaster at the wedding feast is not only redeemed; it's turning into something unprecedented. John is telling us in his rich symbolic language that the wedding of God--the Lover--to the Beloved Community--the church--is about to begin. A taste of delicious new wine hints at how things are going to be different in the Beloved Community of the new covenant—intoxicatingly different. Jesus is here, and he's all about *transformation*. So let the party begin!

It's strange that it so often takes a major disruption in our plans for God to show up. I think it's the case that God is actually always here, it's just that you and I are normally too preoccupied to notice until we need help. Most of the time, we humans aren't really open to transformation. We have so many plans and scripts for how *we* are going to make things happen that it often takes a catastrophe to make us understand that the same old same old just isn't working. But when that happens, our patient and opportunistic God goes to work. You can see it in health crises or loss of loved ones or natural disaster, or even at a wedding party: God shows up, ready to transform things.

Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about “the Beloved Community” as the place God’s beloved people are called to work in partnership with God. In the Beloved Community we have the immeasurable privilege and joy of being intimately involved in God’s work of bringing transformation and blessing into the world. So we also have unusual opportunities in times of crisis.

John’s story tells us a couple of important things about what we can expect in the new age of the Beloved Community. For one thing, we can expect extravagant *spiritual abundance*. When the wedding host runs out of wine, the remedy isn’t just to scoot down to the 7-11 for a few bottles of Ripple. No, Jesus provides gallons of top quality wine--a little preview of the Divine abundance that will characterize his ministry--feeding people with loaves and fishes, and finally, with his own flesh and blood. When human need is greatest, when we are at our most powerless, God rushes in with abundance.

Another thing about the Beloved Community is that *time works differently*. The guests at the wedding feast are amazed that the miraculous transformation of water to wine takes place instantaneously. If you’ve ever visited a vineyard, you may have learned that wine makers can tinker with a lot of things in the wine-making process. They can use various kinds of grapes, purify the water, or use different kinds of barrels for the aging. The one thing they can’t change is the fact that making wine takes time. Those of us of a certain age remember those television wine commercials in which Orson Welles looked into the camera and intoned, “We will sell no wine before its time.” The transformation of grapes into wine takes time. Yet here is Jesus, confounding all human sense by making wine in an instant. In the new community, when human need is great, God’s transforming power can work in a moment.

Martin Luther King demonstrated that in the Beloved Community, the potent wine of transformation could bring about change much faster than people thought possible. During his confinement in Birmingham Jail in 1963, he received a letter from a man in Texas. The writer objected to King’s tactics, saying that “you are in too much of a hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has.”

King’s response in part was:

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

His life was a testament to the transformational power that blazes out of the story of the wedding at Cana--the power to move our lives from a foundation of scarcity and fear to a new way of life grounded in generosity and love. The catastrophe in Haiti is a moment when God’s call to partnership to transform a situation is clear and

unmistakable. This is a moment to trust in God's abundance and God's ability to confound our expectations of time. It is a time when many, many people from across the world are helping to channel God's abundance by digging deep into their pockets to send money and relief supplies to Haiti. And as terrible as this catastrophe is, the longer term recovery will create opportunity for rapid social and economic transformation. The resources and prayer and attention that we are focusing on the Haitian people in their suffering and need have the potential to bring about far-reaching changes that haven't happened before.

In the face of so much tragedy, it is hard to feel that our responses count. It is hard to avoid feeling numbed by the staggering scale of the problem. But let us not forget that Jesus taught and demonstrated how in the Beloved Community, the simplest acts of love are transformative, one person at a time. So I want to conclude by telling you a very simple story about how a simple act can make a world of difference for just one person.

A United Church of Canada minister named Suzanne tells of an experience she had when she was hospitalized. . If you've ever been confined to a hospital bed, you know how slowly time seems to pass. She recalls a particular Sunday afternoon when both she and the woman sharing her hospital room were especially demoralized. They lay in their separate beds, waiting for time to pass and hoping that the loneliness and pain would pass, too. Then the roommate's husband made an unexpected visit. He was a truck driver on a weekend run and hadn't expected to be back until the next day. He talked with his wife and prayed with her. Before he left, he stopped by Suzanne's bed and asked if there was anything she needed. She said no, but somehow he could tell that wasn't true. So he took a washcloth, rinsed it in warm water, and bathed her exhausted, tear-streaked face. That simple act was just what she needed, and when you get the exact thing you need at the moment you need it, it's always a miracle.

On the third day of the wedding feast, Jesus showed up and changed the water into wine. On the third day, Jesus broke the bonds of death and appeared to Mary Magdalene, changing her weeping into rejoicing. On the third day, Jesus called us into a new reality, the Beloved Community.

As members of that community, let us live in awareness of our partnership with an amazing, transforming God. May we wipe the tears from the faces of those whose hearts have been broken by the injustice and greed of the world. May the ordinary water of our daily living be changed into the wine of life flowing freely from the love of God in Christ. May we see and touch and minister to one another in this Beloved Community, so that the reign of Christ may come and God's will be done, on this earth as it is in heaven. Amen.