

A Surprising Abundance
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1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

I love that this story of turning water into wine comes on a Sunday when we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion. What better imagery to make our mouths water for this sacred meal than the promise of an endless supply of the best wine? Here we see gracious hospitality in abundance. The party does not have to end. Let's stay together longer and enjoy what the party has to offer.

In the time of Jesus, wine was not just for getting a boozy feeling or for party celebrations. It was the daily, ordinary drink. An anthropologist named Patrick McGovern who is an expert on ancient fermented beverages notes that in the wines of ancient times, "antioxidants found in the additives and alcohol killed harmful microorganisms, so wine was much safer than raw, unfiltered water."¹ So when the wedding ran out of wine, it is basically like saying they ran out of anything to drink. People would get thirsty.

What are you thirsty for? At a previous church where I worked, I met some thirsty people. I was troubled when I first arrived that there was a culture of drinking and drug use among teens in our town: surveys showed substance abuse among local teens was twice the national average, and the church kids were not immune to this culture. I sought the advice of the senior pastor at the church, and she advised me to look deeper at what these kids are hungry and thirsty for. As I listened to the youth, I heard what the power of inclusion meant to them, and how the invitation to smoke something with a group of kids felt like a ticket towards acceptance and approval. In a sense, it was an initiation rite that they hoped would help them navigate the social world of high school. Once initiated, they found in certain drugs and alcohol a transcendent experience that allowed them to leave behind the pressures from parents and school work and be better connected. Unfortunately, these sensations were often temporary and in some cases, what once led to connection ended up in isolation; what once provided transcendence came crashing down into despair. But I found that in our church work with the teens, we could foster healthy initiation rituals that offered acceptance and approval, the

¹Lynnsay Maynard, "What Would Jesus Drink" on *npr.org*, December 25, 2014

connection kids were craving. I hoped that in teaching spiritual practices with the youth they would be equipped with ways to find a healthy transcendence-- in other words, to discover intimacy God. Slowly, the culture started to change.

Change is hard, as anyone in recovery knows, and it takes renewing commitment to live into the person or group you wish to become. He would have turned 90 last week if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had not been shot 50 years ago. I learned about King when I was in preschool in Atlanta, GA; I think it would have been 12 years after he had been shot and killed. I remember asking my teacher if he would have become president if he had lived. I do not remember her response but for some reason, my mind retained that question and conversation while most other things I was told at 4 years old have slipped away. As an adult, I can see that the country had way too much oppositions to the changes King encouraged us to dream, of racial equality and also economic justice and opposition to war.

But there is still something of that 4-year old child in me, who imagines that someone as radical as King could lead this country. I believe in the principles of equality, liberty, and justice set forth in the founding documents of this country. Further, as a Christian, I know my own well-being is tied to the well-being of my neighbors; no one is truly free when any one of us is oppressed. King taught that "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

But today we live in a world where a group of teenage boys harass and mock a Native American Omaha elder who is singing a spiritual song to usher the spirits of the dead to a resting place, as happened yesterday. I am not as outraged about that act of smug privilege-- after all, I have worked for years among smug, privileged teenagers, and have seen them be transformed into kind, good-hearted people-- as I am about the centuries of treatment of native lands and native peoples that has left them in entrenched poverty. It is one thing to change one person's mind towards kindness; it is another thing to change an entire system that matches prejudice with economic and political power in ways that cement certain groups into a poverty and oppression that even the brightest and most self-motivated can rarely escape.

To be honest, I feel overwhelmed and anxious about our ability in this country to live up to the dreams King set before us. I feel overwhelmed and anxious about our ability to live up to the dreams God set before us; after all, King was just echoing the calls to justice that God shouted through the prophets God sent.

As a pastor, I work in a role where it is my job to proclaim the impossible: A sea that parts so that slaves can cross onto dry land into freedom. A border wall being crumbled to the ground through the power of marching and trumpets. Water turned into wine. Thousands fed from a few fish and loaves of bread. Death not being the the final word. God's shalom brought here to this earth and the lives we live, not just in some heaven far away.

And so, I look to the scriptures for wisdom on what is needed for change. And something I notice from this passage is that change does not happen by Jesus alone. It is a group project that required Jesus, Mary, and the servants.

We can be like Mary and point to the change that needs to happen. Notice Mary's compassion and sensitivity called Jesus' attention to the need at the party, "They have no wine," she said to him when the wine gave out. Even before Jesus' birth, Mary announced changes that needed to happen in her time: scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing the powerful down from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things while the rich come to know what emptiness feels like.

When Mary points out to Jesus that the wine has run dry, Jesus responds, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." I imagine Jesus enjoying the party like anyone else would; maybe he was caught up in someone's story that is filling the room with laughter, or maybe he knows the dancing is about to begin. Jesus' initial action reminds me of the shrug I sometimes get when I ask my own child to do something, especially if she is immersed in some other activity. I know that if I press her, she respects me enough-- at least right now-- to get it done, but often not without showing me a little of her annoyance that I am taking her from whatever she is enjoying, whether that is reading a book, spending time in a daydream, playing with a friend, or watching TV.

But Mary has confidence in Jesus' responsiveness to her words, even if he was a bit surly towards her. We do not hear Jesus agree to help with the wine situation; instead the next action is Mary directing the serving staff to do whatever Jesus tells them.

Like Mary, we can be ones who shine a light on the change that needs to happen. We can raise awareness about the experiences of the vulnerable. Listening to others' experiences can really make a difference. Yesterday in a speech at the Women's March, Joanne Terrell spoke about the power of sharing a meal with someone who is different from you. This is what Jesus actually taught and practiced, for he knew there is

something about that hospitality that changes both the host and the guest, and binds them to one another.

In most stories of the New Testament, Jesus is the underdog. He wins by losing: born in a stable, he is God incarnate. Hanging on the cross with a crown of thorns, he is King of the Jews. Lifeless body sealed in a tomb turns to resurrected glory. There are many times that God works through Jesus' vulnerability and powerlessness to make mighty things happen. However, in this story Jesus seems to come equipped with the power to make change possible-- his Mama knows it. But Jesus seems reluctant to leave what he is doing and use his power to create change.

In that sense, we can be like Jesus too. We may see and know something is wrong but we do not want to leave the party to help create change.

There are many of us who have the power to make change. It may be through our business influence or wealth. It may be through our respect in the community, as an active volunteer, or a civic leader, or an involved parent in the schools. It may be through our choices on how to spend our hard-earned money.

The truth is, each of us has the power to make change. I am moved looking at the pictures of young, courageous, black students who took their seats at whites only lunch counters throughout the south, or at the front of the bus. Most of them did not have great wealth. They did not have prestigious jobs. In fact, they had grown up in places where they were constantly given the messages that their voices and their bodies do not matter. And yet, it was their courage and their witness that led the way to some of the biggest changes our country has seen in the last century.

If we are true servants to Jesus, we can be like the servers at the wedding party who hustled to fill the stone jars with water to the brim. Are we as ready as these laborers to act when called upon? Those stone jars were sacred jars used for purification rituals. Notice they are empty before Jesus performed his miracle. The servants filled the jars with ordinary water. And Jesus transformed them.

In communion as well, we are filled with ordinary elements of bread and juice. And yet they transform us, to live as holy wine. Like most of the people at the party, you have probably been pretty happy with the food and drink served so far. You have been having such a good time, enjoying the people and the music, that you did not notice that what is being served is top shelf or not. But once you taste the transformation Jesus offers, you will find there is nothing like it.

The good wine is yet to come. Thanks be to God.