

When the Wine Runs Out

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 14, 2007.

It's one of those heart-stopping moments in the life of the household staff. The party is still in full swing. It's noisy with feasting and dancing, talk and laughing and music. But back in the kitchen, there's a flurry of activity, a lot of whispering and wringing of hands. Imagine the high anxiety of the servant staff and the wine steward. Who's going to get fired for letting the wine run out? No one else notices -- hardly anyone else, just Mary, who's always observant. She's quietly pondering the whole situation in her heart as she always has done ever since her son was born and curious things started happening around her. Even the bride and the bridegroom don't know yet. But the servants do. And Mary does, and she passes the word on to Jesus.

We have all been there. We forgot to buy enough wine for the party, or ran out of fried rice for all of our dinner guests, or pizza for the youth group. Sometimes it's just a minor inconvenience. But this event is a wedding, one of the big events in life.

Or suppose the event is life itself. We've planned its course, we're celebrating our accomplishments, we have all our family and friends together -- but it doesn't go as we planned. At some point the wine runs out -- the festive drink is gone -- the wine of satisfaction from an old hobby, say, or the wine of meaning from a job, or the wine of joy from a relationship. Or maybe we've run out of idealism. We look into the jar of our contemporary culture and see that the values of our affluence are empty, our moral richness has run out. In the Bible, marriage is sometimes used to describe the relationship between God and God's people. The Kingdom of God is compared to a wedding feast. But in our wedding feast today, we suddenly realize, this is not what the Kingdom of God is all about. Being too long in a lifestyle or culture at odds with our own religious principles, we have run dry.

When that happens, it is good that we included in our list of wedding guests someone who can save us from our own foolishness -- redeem us, so to speak. But look what he does -- something unexpected...

While the servants are fretting about how to break the embarrassing news to the bridegroom, Jesus tells them to get some water and fill the big jars. They stand there and look at him in puzzled silence for an instant, trying to figure out what this strange request is all about, perhaps trying to decide whether to obey this man or to ignore him. Excuse me, but it's WINE, we're out of WINE, not water! The revelation of God's glory hinges on their decision, but of course they don't know that. So what will they do? Mary tells them, "Do whatever he tells you." Will they trust her, or will they refuse? But jars are meant to be filled, and what else is there to do now, anyway? Imagine what they might be thinking as they run back and forth transferring water from well to pot to jar, one jar at a time, until the jars are filled to the brim. Those jars sure hold a lot.

We too hold a lot, too. We are rich in possibilities, and when we run dry, we are meant to be filled. But when Jesus tells us to fill up with water when we are out of wine, do we say, "I'm sorry, I'm busy. I don't have time to worry about water"? When we are invited to try a new

thing that doesn't fit our usual mindset, will we play it safe and refuse, saying "That's not possible," or "That's not the way it's done"? Or can we see daily frustrations and daily hurdles as opportunities for God to fill us? Look at the neglected, frustrating or unimportant parts of our lives, our relationships and work -- what we take for granted -- these are the water of our lives. Like water, some things are plain and clear and always with us -- things like: this work is meaningless; nothing good will come out of this illness; this society is unjust and you just have to accept it. These are what Jesus invites us to pay attention to.

For the water that Jesus offers to us is living water; the world that he offers to us is a new world. Jesus opens up to us an alternative to a world that doesn't dream about God. Jesus helps us to dream about new possibilities, to see grace where we had seen only sorrow, to see a new land where we had thought there was only a dead-end street. So open yourself to considering a different kind of perspective from the one you take for granted. Look at the water. Maybe you will find wine.

And maybe you will find God. I wonder if those servants sneaked a taste of the water-now-wine as they poured it into a cup. Imagine the servants carrying the new wine to the wine steward, their eyes wide as saucers, their hearts pounding hard, with mystery in their hands. Have I just encountered God? Is this what God is about? This is how God reveals himself to us -- by taking our water and giving us back wine, taking our emptiness and giving us back riches.

There's a powerful wonderment in seeing the common made holy. We always marvel that God would come to us in ordinary ways, but -- it's true -- we find God not only in the splashy and the spectacular but also, especially, in the mundane and the lowly. The whole biblical story tells us that this is how God works. God picks the common, the imperfect, and the humble among us and transforms them into holy vessels for God's grand purposes. We read in Scripture how God took a stuttering murderer and turned him into the liberator of a whole people. How God took a young girl and turned her into the mother of the redeemer of the world. Forty years ago, God took a simple bus ride and through it catapulted a young man named Martin Luther King into prophetic leadership for his people, and for all of us. All of these people were open to another reality in which God's values, not passing culture's, are honored.

Moses -- that stuttering murderer -- could imagine arguing with the ruler of Egypt to set free a million slaves. In our own time, Martin Luther King imagine -- dream -- of a time when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing, "Free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Martin turned from the reality we always took for granted -- that there are first-class persons and there are second-class persons -- and dreamed of another reality. When we are open to God's work, God gives us graces in unexpected places, and in unexpected -- unsuspecting -- people, like us. Where is *our* transformation? What are the unlikely graces in *our* lives?

At this wedding feast which took place just before the Passover, Jesus turned plain water into festive wine. A few years later at another, more somber feast just before another fateful Passover, he took wine and turned it into his eucharistic blood. This is what God is like! God is about transformation. No longer is water just water, or wine just wine. The water has turned to

wine, the wine is now blood, what is common is now holy -- water, wine, us! Yes, we too are made holy by God. (Look ahead to the baptism we are about to witness, that will welcome J.J. and Sally's daughter Amelia into the household of God. That plain water will become the water of baptism and new life.) The liberating power of God gives us a new way of thinking -- a new reality, a new world even, a kingdom -- a kingdom of God! Where, as the prophets said, the mountains are laid low and the valleys are lifted up, where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. -- where all are precious in the loving and merciful eyes of God. In God's kingdom, all are invited to the wedding feast because there will always be plenty of wine -- it is the wine of new life, the wine of a new covenant.

For the gospel-writer John, the beginning of this transformation is in the water changed to wine at Cana, but the end is the whole world transformed, every life transformed through Christ into divine life. Like the servants, we are meant to be participants in this newness. We are meant to be agents of God who are part of bringing about this transformation. We do this by living in the Kingdom of God in our own daily lives even when the world around us seems to be ruled by other gods and other values. As individuals, we can live justly, show compassion, befriend and share with the poor. As people of God, we refuse to treat all talk of peace as a political football but reclaim it as a Gospel imperative. As Church, we can own the Church's prophetic role from Amos and Micah all the way to Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King, Jr. -- own its rightful place not as a servant of the state but as its conscience.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets like Isaiah foretold the coming of a messianic time when there would always be an abundance of wine B a divine gift which God would give as a sign of the new age. The wedding feast at Cana is the sign that what the prophets sing about in hope has come to pass, when we can sing to the Lord a new song. Isaiah says, You shall be called a new name. You will no longer be called Forsaken or Desolate; you will be called My Delight is in Her, you will be called Married. Yes, *we* are married. This is *our* story. This is our wedding feast, we are the bride of Christ, and God is both host and our drink, who emptied himself and poured himself out for us -- our living water, our cup of salvation. Drink from the rich wine of divine love, and celebrate the Good News.