

Filled to the Brim

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*Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
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Text: John 2:1-11

A religious scholar was at a conference in Hong Kong, and she was running late. As the sun was setting, she caught a water taxi, which sped out over the harbor as it carried her to her destination. Darkness was falling, and it was just her and the pilot of the boat alone on the water. He began to make conversation with her, asking what brought her to Hong Kong, and when he found out she was a Christian scholar, he looked at her with a serious expression on his face and said, "So tell me, who is this man Jesus?"

It used to be you had to go all the way around the world to get asked a question like this. Those of you that are older than I am grew up in a world where, by and large, the whole culture worked together to support a particular kind of Christian identity. One of our own members told me he got in trouble as a kid for ice skating on a Sunday, that a police officer rolled up and told him and his friends they shouldn't be out on the pond on a Sabbath. But that world, and all the good and bad things about it, is gone, isn't it? Within just a few miles of this sanctuary there are houses of worship for Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. And the fastest growing religious identity is the set of folks that claim no religion at all. We can mourn the loss of what was, but it seems to me that this is an incredibly exciting time to be a Christian. Because if our faith is making a difference in the way we live in relationship with our neighbors, in how we spend our time and money, and in how we participate in public life in our communities, there are many, many opportunities to be asked, "Who is this man Jesus?"

This first part of the calendar year is the church season of Epiphany. Epiphany revolves around the question "Who is Jesus?" It begins with a shining star that brings foreign visitors, and it ends with Jesus himself transfigured and shining on a mountain top, and in between we get these stories that help us explore who Jesus is and why he came to live among us. So as we read the gospel stories over the next couple of months, try and keep these questions in the back of your mind... What does this story reveal, what information does it add to our picture of who Jesus is and why he's here? And what does it mean for those who follow him—not only those first disciples, but us today?

Today's gospel story could have been a sitcom script. John's gospel is usually very serious, but this is a strangely light-hearted episode. Nobody is in danger of being stoned. Nobody's trying to kill Jesus. Nobody here is sick to the point of death. The only danger is that a wedding party looks like it's going to come to an embarrassing early end, because they've run out of wine. It's a genuine problem, especially in a culture like that of Jewish Galilee in the first century, where a public embarrassment like this could haunt you and your family for years. But in contrast to the other challenges Jesus faces, the stakes here seem fairly low.

We don't know why the wine ran out. Some people fault the bridegroom for poor planning, but others point out that in first-century Jewish communities it would

have been common for the guests to bring wine to the celebration, to show their support for the couple, and to share the burden of the expenses. But regardless of whose fault it was, the wine ran out. There's a funny scene with a little back and forth between Jesus, who doesn't want to get involved, and his mother, who thinks he should.

The servants at the banquet are the quiet heroes of the story. Just look at the way they do one crazy thing after another, just because Jesus tells them to. There is plenty of work in the banquet to keep them busy, but Jesus sends them on an insane errand to fill the six giant stone jars with water for no apparent reason, and they just drop everything they're doing and follow his instructions. And then Jesus tells them to draw a ladle-full from one of the jars and bring it to the chief steward. He doesn't tell the servant to taste it first. And that means that when the servant approaches the chief steward and says, "Here boss, try some of this!" he doesn't know what he's giving him. Maybe it's still water, and the boss will bite his head off for messing with him. Or maybe Jesus is an evil magician who just conjured up six vats of battery acid. But the servants' trust in Jesus pays off, and the banquet is saved, in a big way – with 120 gallons of good, rich, high-quality wine. And only they, the servants, together with Jesus, Mary, and the disciples, know the real story of what happened. The conclusion of the story tells us that this was the first of Jesus' signs, and the disciples believed in him.

What does this story reveal about Jesus? If this is a sign, as the story says, what does it signify? If we look back into the Old Testament, we see wine used to symbolize God's blessing. Wine comes from grapes, grapes come from vineyards, which need the sun and the rain and protection from pests. God's protection and blessing flow to Israel when the relationship is good, and therefore the wine flows too. For the wine to run out means the people are left wondering if God is still with them, if the promises God made are still good. When the wine runs out, it brings a crisis of faith.

I think we know how it feels when the wine runs out, don't you? At this late stage of the pandemic, two years in, I'm weary, and I want things to be normal again. But if the disease were to vanish tomorrow, we'd still be living in a country where political rancor and dysfunction keeps our leaders from addressing other challenges and building up the common good. I look at yesterday's volcanic eruption in Tonga sending waves across the Pacific Ocean, and I wonder about what the coastlines will look like in fifty years, when my children are grown, and—so the scientific community tells us—the water line will be markedly higher. Add to this the individual burdens so many of us are carrying right now, and I think we have a sense of what it feels like for the wine to run out, don't we? Does God have more good in store for us, or is this it?

When the wine runs out, when God's blessings seem to be at an ebb, Mary's words for the servers are for us, "Do whatever Jesus tells you." And just as with them, the things Jesus asks of us don't always make sense: do not worry about what you will eat or wear, love your enemies and do good to them, forgive seventy-times-seven. To do what Jesus tells us puts us in a vulnerable position. It puts us at risk of seeming foolish. But this weekend, as we remember the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his legacy of nonviolent resistance to white supremacy, we have an ongoing historical testimony in the public life of our nation to the ability of those who follow the way of Jesus, those who do whatever he tells us, to transform the world. The promise of our founding as a country, the proposition that all people are created equal, seemed to have run out. But a movement of people committed to love even when faced with brutal violence showed us that the best of our shared life was yet to be, that the best wine had been saved for last.

What is Jesus telling you to do? You don't have to be a hero, like Dr. King. The everyday relationships and roles we live and move through bring us opportunities to

let go of wrongs done to us, to do good to those who mean us harm, and to step out on faith when it seems like there isn't enough time or money or energy for something we know in our bones is meant to be. And doesn't Jesus show us that the ordinary stuff of life—water—can be transformed into a rich blessing for a whole community? Your ordinary gifts, ordinary words, ordinary presence, blessed by Jesus, can be so much more.

Those neighbors of ours that I talked about before, the ones asking, sometimes but not always out loud, "Who is Jesus?"—they may never crack open a Bible, but they can read your life and your example. What difference might it make to see that for them too, the wine hasn't run out, and the best is yet to come?

"Fill them up to the brim," Jesus says about the water jars. When he acts, he maximizes the gift, he leaves no room for something more. With the help of those who trust in him, he blesses the gathering with abundance beyond all imagining.

So when the wine runs out in your life, may the presence of Jesus give you hope that the best is yet to come. May your ordinary gifts yield extraordinary blessings in his hands. And may God fill all of us to the brim with abundant life. Amen.