



“Just When You Think It’s Over”

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John 2:1-12*

This past week Pepper noted that I probably had a lot of material for this Sunday’s sermon, given that I was just coming off of a big family wedding for my niece, Chrisie, and her new husband, Kaleb.

I thought about her point for a moment and said, “Nah, the wedding was in a ‘dry’ county in Arkansas. My sister’s family would have never run out of wine at their daughter and son in-law’s wedding, because they wouldn’t have been caught dead serving it!”

Things are a little different back home than in California. My Midwestern relatives—even my Iowa relatives—would never run out of wine, because they are teetotalers, but they do worry about running out of other things. My sister, for example, was so concerned about whether we would have enough cake to serve everyone at her oldest daughter’s wedding a couple of years ago, that we ended up with about twice as much cake as we needed.

She was more conservative in her estimates with Chrisie and Kaleb’s wedding, but I bet she’s still got wedding cake in her freezer from their wedding that was held earlier this month—and not just the top of the cake that they saved for the bride and groom.

Regardless of whether we come from tee-totaling families or not, most of us can probably identify with at least intermittent concerns about having enough of something for a particular occasion, while others would acknowledge worrying in general about having enough material, emotional, or spiritual resources.

II

So where do these ubiquitous feelings of scarcity come from?

I trace them in my own family to hardships such as the Great Depression and the blights and famines that earlier generations endured in Europe—situations that brought them to this country in the first place.

Having now lived more than half of my life in the city, though, I have discovered that rural people are not the only ones driven, at times, by a sense of scarcity. “City people”—even rich city people—are no less vulnerable to the insidious fear of scarcity than the people in rural Midwestern communities.

The Rev. Dr. Daniel Paul Matthews, Rector of Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York City, illustrated this fact quite well in a church newsletter article that he wrote, in which he shared an old story about John D. Rockefeller. Here, Dr. Matthews wrote:

...a reporter once asked [John D. Rockefeller] how much money was enough and he responded, “A little more than I have.” His answer sounds so absurd that one can only react with a smile. However, the old billionaire was expressing a perspective that is common to all of us in this culture. None of us has enough.

It is as if we are all caught up in a whispering campaign. We hear the whispers every day from our neighbors, our friends, and even from the Church, “We’re not sure we can make it with what we have. We don’t have enough. We need a little more than we have right now. Everything would then be better.”ⁱ

We don’t have to be immigrant farmers, or robber-baron billionaires or their progeny, to be hounded by a sense of scarcity. Ideas of scarcity are in the air that we breathe. They are part of the capitalist system in which we function. Such worries have also been fueled by the recessionary economic climate in which we now live and the effects of that recession—most notably on the value of homes in our area, the unemployment rate in our nation, and the state budget.

This sense of scarcity permeates our secular culture and can have a negative effect on us spiritually. It can cause us to embrace a theology of scarcity, which counters the biblical truth about God’s grace and the more abundant life that God hopes for us.

A theology of scarcity can lead us to doubt God’s forgiveness and to believe that God is stingy with grace. I suspect, for example, that Pat Robertson has been influenced by such a theology, which has led him sadly to blame the Haitian earthquake victims for their own plight.

A sense of scarcity—of not having enough—often fuels other concerns. Notice how in today’s gospel reading the concern is not just that the wine has run out; a further concern has been raised—that the party is over, and perhaps by implication that the hosts have not provided amply for their guests, which would reflect poorly on them in their social circle.

Yet, John reminds us in this miracle story that we don't get what we expect. We don't even get what we deserve. Instead, we get an invitation to enjoy a better day and a better way in this life and the next.

Whether or not we enjoy this feast depends upon at least two things: 1) do we hear the invitation, and 2) do we respond affirmatively to it?

The truth of human experience is that some people hear the invitation and respond to it, and enjoy the more abundant life that God hopes for us this side of heaven. While others don't get the message, either because it's drowned out by the injustice or suffering that they endure, or because their own inner demons lead them to believe that the invitation isn't addressed to them.

III

The author of John's gospel tells the story like this: on the third day, there was a wedding at Cana for some friends of Jesus' family. Mary, his mother, had gone ahead to help prepare for the banquet. Jesus and his disciples were in attendance as guests.

After the wedding ceremony, when the wine supply had run out, Mary went to Jesus and informed him of the problem and asked for help. He said that it wasn't his time. Mary was undaunted by his dismissal. She remained confident that he could work a miracle, and told the servants to do whatever Jesus instructed.

Jesus told the servants to fill with water the stone jars that had been reserved for the rite of purification. They did as he requested and filled them to the brim—all 150 gallons. Then Jesus said to the servants, draw some out and take it to the sommelier.

Now the sommelier had not been told that the wine had run out, or that ritual purification jars were being used. So he drank unwittingly from the tasting vessel expecting a wine something like a Charles Shaw, but instead savored a vintage more like Dom Perignon. With surprise and excitement, the sommelier ran to the bridegroom and exclaimed in amazement, "Wow, most hosts serve the good wine first, and the inferior once the guests are plastered. But you have saved the best wine until now!"

IV

Many well-intentioned people spend a lot of time trying to decide whether or not, and how, Jesus turned water into wine. While these kinds of questions may be interesting intellectually, at the end of the day, I find the metaphorical interpretation of these texts as compelling as—or more compelling than—the scientific or literary analysis of them. This is so because my faith isn't dependent upon the physics of miracles, it's dependent upon the vision that Christ

proclaimed through his ministry—which was a vision of a better future for all of us—both in this life and in the next.

Furthermore, faithfulness, in my book, is not dependent upon whether the miracle at Cana occurred exactly as John described; instead, faithfulness is determined by whether we believe that miracles are still possible even though the “party” seems to be over, *and* on whether we are part of making miracles happen for ourselves and others this side of heaven.

When we experience significant loss or some of our basic hopes or needs go unfulfilled, it can be hard to believe that God has good things in store for us.

I remember, for example, a wonderful widower named Jim, who was a member of a congregation that I served back East some years ago. Jim was a retired executive from a Fortune 500 company. He had had an impressive career, been happily married, and helped raise two lovely daughters. He enjoyed the arts, knew how to choose a nice bottle of wine, and contributed a great deal to the church that we were part of. As I got to know Jim, I was surprised to learn that he expected to be single for the rest of his life—clearly because he was still grieving the death of his second wife.

I encouraged Jim to see other women socially, and he did. But he said that he’d never marry again. That was, until a few months after he returned from his 50th class reunion, and started telling me about a high school girl friend that he had reconnected with back home. Her name was Shirley. Before I knew it, the two were talking about marriage. In rather short order, Jim sold his home in New York, moved to South Carolina, and enjoyed a modern-day rendition of the Wedding at Cana.

I remember, too, a woman named Sarah, who was single and well into her 40s, who announced one night a deacons’ meeting that she was about to adopt a child from Eastern Europe. (This was back in the day when international adoption seemed like a new idea and single-parent adoption an even newer idea.) Sarah went on to adopt not only one child, but two—both of whom are now in high school and who are bright and beautiful and doing well socially and in all of their extracurricular activities.

When Sarah was asked by a friend at that deacons’ meeting what had inspired her to adopt, she said simply, “I have always imagined being married and being a mother. Marriage, she said, you can only do so much about when you’re single; but motherhood, I realized, didn’t have to be foregone or delayed any longer.”

In retrospect, it seems to me that it would have been easy for Sarah to accept the idea that the wine had run out, so to speak—that she was not going to marry and

to forego a partnership and parenting—but instead, she trusted that God had something good in store for her, even though others had presumed that the wine had run out.

I know that most of us have been deeply grieved by the tragedy that has unfolded this past Tuesday as a result of the 7.0 earthquake that occurred off the shore of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. As if two hundred years of poverty were not enough, this island nation was struck by one of the worst earthquakes in record-keeping history. Surely it has been difficult in that island nation to believe that there was a future and hope for the people of Haiti. Perhaps now, more than ever, doubts and fears loom large.

Yet amidst the deep tragedy that we've seen unfurled in the news coverage this past week, I sensed a glimmer of hope that there are better days ahead for Haiti that are beyond mere earthquake recovery. I've been particularly encouraged by the words of Presidents Obama and Clinton and Secretary of State Clinton concerning their hopeful outlook on Haiti that lies beyond this current veil of tears, and I've been heartened by the outpouring of international aid, and the commitments of world leaders to work together for a better day and a better way for the people of Haiti.

As experts on change leadership are quick to observe, a crisis is often the first salvo on real change in everything from an individual's life to the life of a whole nation. Perhaps in some ways that we don't fully understand, this earthquake could be the first salvo on real and lasting change for the people of Haiti. Perhaps in the not too distant future, earthquake survivors will be tasting the new wine that John described, and we could be among the stewards who help the survivors experience that miracle through our prayers, through our own commitment to learning about the history and culture of Haiti, through our offerings of time, talent, and treasure, through our public policy work, and through our support of missionaries and relief workers who are staging assistance here in the US and who are on the ground providing direct services in Haiti.

V

So whether we are grappling with individual or corporate sense of wine shortages, the gospel reminds us that when we dare to believe like Jim, like Sarah, and like our Presidents and Mrs. Clinton, that God has more wedding wine—more and better days in store for us—God is glorified, we are blessed, and the wedding feast goes on. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: the party isn't over. It's just begun! Amen.

¹ <http://www.episcopal-ut.org/DialogueMain/DialogueArticle/june2003/trinity.htm>