

“Transformation”
Psalm 36:5-10
John 2:1-11
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Introduction to Scripture:

We all know how the Bible begins: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Then God formed a human from the dust of the earth, and breathed life into him, and he became a living being. That’s what the Bible says God’s first agenda is. To bring life out of the dust of the earth.

We also know how Jesus’ adult life begins: he is baptized in the River Jordan and is tempted in the wilderness, and then starts his work in the world. As we’ll see in the next two weeks in the gospels of John and Luke, the first thing Jesus does – just like the first thing God does – is to bring life into the world. And just like God, Jesus takes the most mundane substance and transforms it to bring life to the world. Today we begin in John 2:1-11.

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Today in Haiti there are at least 50,000 dead; it may be as high as 200,000. There is no wine. There is no water. Most of the water jugs are shattered, along with the buildings and everything else. So while it’s nice that one day at a wedding Jesus turned over a hundred gallons of water into wine, what difference does that make at such a time as this? Quite a bit, I submit. Quite a bit indeed.

But let’s begin with Scripture.

The crisis was that there was no wine. It wasn’t about drunkenness but rather the blessing of the family and the joy of the guests. Wine was the sign of celebration, as essential as the vows. In Jesus’ time, as is true today in the Middle East, the celebration, the feasting, the families lingering together for a good long time – these are the core of the wedding. So when Jesus’ mother Mary said, “They have no wine,” this was no small thing. This was a sign of something gone horribly wrong. Maybe it was the deepest kind of poverty.

Maybe shame kept the family from reaching out to their clan. Maybe it was a deliberate act by the parents to withhold their blessing. Maybe it was just plain stinginess. Whatever was behind it, there was no wine. As my friend Tom Are put it, “at the moment where people should be most joyful in their connection to one another, there is no joy.”

This is of a different caliber than other crises that take place at weddings. Reflecting on the myriad weddings he’s performed in his ministry, my friend Tom notes that you can put up with a thousand snafus. Now the pastor at Village Church in Kansas City, Tom’s favorite wedding must still be the one he performed in 1988 in Charleston, South Carolina. I confess it tops anything I’ve seen. Consider it a bit of comic relief amidst all the horrifying news. Tom remembers it this way:

The father of the bride escorted his daughter down the aisle to the full stops of the Trumpet Voluntary. As they reached the chancel, in full view of the gathered assembly, the pants of the bride’s father fell to his ankles. Evidently he never closed that little clip in the rental pants that can make your 34 a 44 in a matter of ... well before one can say “I do.” The organist in the balcony looked in the rear view mirror ... I don’t know if he considered it a “rear view” before, but it was that day ... and when [the organist] saw the bride’s father standing there in powder-blue boxer shorts, he lost control with laughter. The organ stopped (didn’t finish, just stopped), and [the organist] fell over on the organ bench. He was hidden by the balcony rail, so I could no longer see him up there, but we did hear occasional snorts as he tried to control his laughter. The rest of the congregation, in striking contrast, stood in absolute silence, many with their eyes lifted heavenwards as if experiencing some vision just above the chancel. The silence was broken when the bride reached down, grabbed her father’s trousers and said, “Here you go, Daddy.” It has helped with my expectations for weddings. They are lower now. If everyone gets through the service with their clothes on, I feel some measure of success.

Like Tom says, snafus like this happen at weddings all the time. Well, maybe not snafus like this, at least not in Lake Forest, though I have my share of stories which will remain untold.

In retrospect, small mishaps can be kind of fun. But there are other kinds of weddings too, weddings that are not fun at all, and though a rare breed, they are horrifying. Tom puts it this way:

What's terrible, absolutely unbearable is if you ever do a wedding where there is a noticeable absence of joy. Everyone is proper, and perhaps purposeful, but no joy. Bride and groom are serious, but smiles are easily controlled. The candles are beautiful, but the parents look as if they could be listening to a presidential debate rather than watching their children get married. If you have ever [attended] such a joy-less wedding, you would swap it for one where pants fall down every time.¹

At the wedding at Cana, there was no joy. There was no blessing. There was no abundance. There was no promise of life. And everybody knew it because, as Jesus' mother said, "They have no wine."

But what Jesus' mother also knew is that Jesus could do something about it. And so he did. Though he wasn't wild about intervening: "What business is that of ours?" ... though he wasn't crazy about the timing: "it was not his hour yet," he protests ... nevertheless, Jesus doesn't object when she tells the stewards to do whatever he tells them. And though he did not choose the time or place or circumstance when he is called into service, the human need chose him. So he told the servants to fill their massive, empty vessels, 20-30 gallons each, with water, and then he told them to take some to the steward to drink. Jesus had transformed water into wine, superb wine in absurd quantities. But that wasn't the most important transformation that happened. Far more importantly, he had transformed this joyless, lifeless, hopeless wedding – and he had made it overflow with blessing and abundance.

Because, of course, this story isn't just about weddings, is it? It's about life – life without joy, life without blessing, life without abundance. And there is no one in this room who cannot think of examples. The loveless marriage that casts a pall on the children. The company and its employees destroyed by a narcissistic leader. People who have settled into their victimhood or been sucked into the black hole of depression. I could go on and on: whether it's searing poverty or ruthless gossip, a brutal economy or failed leadership, there are plenty of places in this world like the wedding at Cana where there is no wine. There is no joy. There is no blessing. There is no abundance. There is no promise of life. But just as Jesus calls the servants to fill clay jars so he can transform ordinary water into wine, Jesus is still calling us to use the mundane vessels of our lives and put them to use in his name. And he will transform what we offer into the life this world so desperately needs.

If we are willing to let him. Jesus doesn't just take our empty jars and return them empty. When we put our lives in Jesus' service, we can count on them being transformed. So if we're looking for Jesus to bless the status quo, we will be disappointed. Today, as our country celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, King's own words remind us that Jesus will change our lives if we let him. Dr. King said:

When an affluent society would coax us to believe that happiness consists in the size of our automobiles, the impressiveness of our houses, and the expensiveness of our clothes, Jesus reminds us, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

When we would yield to the temptation of a world rife with sexual promiscuity and gone wild with a philosophy of self-expression, Jesus tells us that "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

When we refuse to suffer for righteousness and choose to follow the path of comfort rather than conviction, we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are they

which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

When we, through compassionless detachment and arrogant individualism, fail to respond to the needs of the underprivileged, the Master says, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”²

Which brings us back to Haiti, and to all the places in this world, our world, where there is no wine. Because there will always be places like the wedding at Cana where there is no joy, no blessing, no abundance. Where there is no promise of life.

And as long as that's true, Jesus is still calling his servants to use the mundane vessels of our lives, and fill them with whatever we have, to put to use in his name. And he will transform what we offer, transforming our gifts into joy and blessing and abundant life, the life this world so desperately needs.

This church has a history of that, you know. Our founders saw they city of Chicago rising up out of nowhere untamed, and offered their dreams and hopes and resources, and out of it came a college and schools and this congregation, built in the middle of a forest at the edge of a lake. Our early leaders saw the scourge of slavery for the horror that it was, and instead of sitting politely and silently, they offered their political and economic power to make things change. Later generations saw the need in China and Korea, and they went, bringing medicine and education and a lifetime of service and sometimes even their young people to fill for medicine, and they put their money and sometimes their own lives in service. Later generations, when civil rights problems reared their ugly heads, our members saw the emptiness of inequality and marched in Montgomery even at the risk of social ostracism. I don't know what God is calling us exactly to do this day, but I do know this. I know there are needs out there in this world. There are needs in Africa, and there are needs in North Chicago, and there are needs in Haiti, and there are

needs in our own lives. I know that there are people here whose own lives feel empty, emptied by sorrow or health concerns, grief or economic uncertainty. And still Jesus calls us: bring your empty vessels to me, and fill them with what you have. For I have come to bring life, Jesus tells us, I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.

What do you have to offer? It may not seem like much, in the face of the world's needs. It may just seem like empty vessels, clay jars, not much at all. Bring them anyway. Bring them, and fill them with whatever water you have. Then put them in Jesus' hands. Who knows what joy he will make of it? My guess is, plenty. Amen.

¹ Tom Are, Jr., Pastor, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, in his unpublished 2004 paper for The Moveable Feast preaching colloquium.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transformed nonconformist," *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), pp. 22-3.