

“Water, Wine, and the Way of Love”
January 16, 2022

Amos 9:11-15
John 2:1-11

The poster for this year’s Human Rights Week at the University uses those familiar words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

As was often the case, King said this more than once. He spoke those words during a Christmas Eve sermon in 1967 in which he called our attention to the “interrelated quality” of the universe, adding, “We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.” In that sermon, King pointed out that we can’t even get up and get going in the morning without our connections to people around the globe, concluding: “Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world.”

But the first instance of this phrase that I could find came several years earlier in his famous and challenging “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” Responding to the religious leaders in Birmingham who suggested he was an “outside agitator,” King wrote:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

If you haven’t read through King’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” recently—or ever—I encourage you to take some time to do so this week. The letter reminds us that King’s words and work helped us to come as far as we have in the nearly 60 years since that letter was written—and it shows us how relevant King still is for the road ahead at a time when many dismiss him as old news. And, yes, the letter can still make white, liberal Christians uncomfortable.

Out of my own discomfort, I came to John’s story about Jesus in Cana. It is often read during these weeks after Epiphany when we turn our attention to the stories of Jesus’ early ministry. Now, weddings and wine might seem far removed from the concerns of justice. But the more I listened, the more I heard this story speak in ways that were profound and convicting.

This is a story about lack of patience. Watch and listen. At least one person at that wedding is not willing to simply wait around for things to get better.

Mary—and note, John’s gospel never tells the name of the woman referred to as simply “the mother of Jesus”—Mary, seeing a problem, comes to Jesus. “They have no wine,” she says. She is impatient. She wants something done.

Jesus replies that this is none of her business. And, he adds, it's really none of his business, either. As is so often the case, Jesus doesn't sound the way we think Jesus should sound, Jesus doesn't act in the way we think he should act, does he?

Still, Mary says to the servants: "Do whatever Jesus tells you."

I don't know what she had in mind at the time, but I hear Jesus telling us again and again: "Love one another." And Jesus never seems to ask us to be patient in the face of the misery that we see in our neighbors. "Get on with it," Jesus tells us. "Love one another."

And let us remember that, as Cornell West told us, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Jesus assesses the situation and looks for God's abundance—which isn't always obvious to most of us. There are six empty jars. There is water. And that will be enough. That will be more than enough.

And then—from water, wine.

The novelist Reynolds Price says: "It seems unlikely that John would describe such a homely kitchen-wonder unless he had been present and convinced of its actual and inexplicable occurrence."¹ From the start, however, people have tried to find another explanation.

We are puzzled. The steward at the wedding is puzzled. He has no idea where the servants got this good wine. There must be a rational explanation, and so he calls for the bridegroom and praises him for his exceptional hospitality. That must be the reason.

But something greater is happening here.

Our conventional assumptions about what is possible, about where God is found, and about how God is known are shattered. This is an act of abundance and new possibilities.

So, John's gospel speaks of water turned into wine not as a miracle but as a *sign*. What is of real importance here is not the event but the reality to which the event points.

We need to look, not at the miracle—for those who do will always need *one more* to be certain. We need to look to what is beyond—to this Jesus who is showing the abundance of God in a world of need.

Water turned into wine is a sign.

To what does it point?

What's going on?

We get a hint from the prophet Amos in his attempt to describe the coming of the realm of God. "The mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I

will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine.”

This is what God desires: Abundance. Restoration. Let’s let that sink into your weary soul for just a minute. Imagine the cities rebuilt. Imagine the hills and mountains flowing with all good things.

God’s will is that you would know abundance.

God’s will is that your ruined places would be rebuilt.

And that is not just God’s desire for you alone. This is God’s desire for all people.

This abundance of wine is accompanied by vision of the rebuilding of the ruined cities.

So, listen as King reminds us and encourages us: “God is able to conquer the evils of history. If at times we despair because of the relatively slow progress being made . . . let us gain new heart in the fact that God is able. . . . With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy.”

When Jesus shows up at the wedding in Cana, when water turns to wine, it is a *sign* that the sun is beginning to shine upon bleak and desolate valleys. The sunrise is slow, but it is certain.

A wedding is an occasion of hope and unknowing. A wedding brings with it the hope for the best that life might bring—and in the background are the unknown challenges and the unknown responses that a couple will face.

A wedding is an occasion of hope and unknowing. So, too, is the beginning of a new year. So, too, is each day of our lives.

Each morning, reminded of our connections with all humankind, with a renewed sense that “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly,” we go into the world to participate in its daily rebuilding. We know neither the challenges nor the opportunities that will come to us in the hours ahead. Even in uncertainty we live our days in hope—in the hope that we will be up to the challenges, that we will make good use of the opportunities, hoping for the best in life for ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation.

When the wine runs low at a wedding celebration, Mary is impatient. She wants something done.

This is our tradition.

This is who we are.

We are restless people.

We don’t settle for easy answers.

We don't settle for the way things are.

We don't settle for the way we are.

The faith we know is not about adapting and adjusting.

In that faith, let us work with God, and with all people in this interconnected world, doing what we can to rebuild.

¹ Reynolds Price, *Incarnation*, pg. 44.