

The Best Is (Always) Yet to Come
John 2::1-11
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It wasn't exactly the biggest crisis in the world, was it, running out of wine at the wedding? I mean, since when is it a bad thing when people fail to drink themselves into oblivion? But I guess running out of wine was a crisis in those days if you were the host, since your honor, and that of your family, was riding on your hospitality. The text doesn't mention any family ties between Mary and the families of the bride and groom, but it seems like Mary had enough honor at stake, or at least compassion for those about to be dishonored, to not only mention the shortage of wine to Jesus, but to oblige him to do it by telling the servants to "Do whatever he tells you," even after he's expressed his reluctance. You see, Jesus is probably not particularly concerned with the honor of the fathers of the bride and groom, but rather the honor of his own Father which might be at stake if his ministry is reduced to doing face-saving parlor tricks. But for motivations that go unexplained in the passage, Jesus obliged his mother and all the guests and "revealed his glory" through his transformation of water into wine, not just any wine, but "the good wine," better than the first round, probably the best anyone could have hoped for.

Of course, there's a great deal more behind this story than the chemical transformation of the evening's beverages. The Gospel of John prefers the idea of

“signs” to that of “miracles” used in the other Gospels and I think in this story that is a particularly helpful way for us to think about it’s implications for us. Clearly, the miracle saved the day, or the night, as the case might have been, but it’s purpose was less to amaze people with Jesus power than it was to point to something else, namely God’s glory. Indeed, the final words of the passage note that it was his disciples, not the partygoers, who believed in him. Not even the steward, the caterer, so to speak, knew from whence the additional wine had come. But those who witnessed Jesus’ actions believed in him not because of his power, but because he had revealed to them, or at least reminded them of, something important about their God.

In the background of this story is the story of the people of Israel, a people blessed at one point in their history with good wine – all the blessings of the land of Caanan, a land overflowing with milk and honey, olives and grapes, figs and freedom – but who had come to that point of the party where the wine had run out. Although the story doesn’t say why there was a shortage, its symbolism might suggest that it was not because too many guests were invited, but rather that its supply was limited from the start, or that the guests overindulged early. The wedding at Cana took place at the low point of Israel’s party, when its blessings were being enjoyed by the Romans, when its own people were reduced to being the servants at the party, rather than the guests. A national celebration whose highlight was the reigns of Kings David and Solomon was now on the verge of a public

humiliation the likes of which might end the festivities. The wine had run out on Israel, or so it seemed, when Mary prodded her son to do what he could.

It is important to remember, too, the context of this story, a wedding, a favorite Biblical metaphor to describe the relationship between God and God's people. A relationship is at stake here: could the couple stay together if their honor was so damaged that they lost faith in one another to carry on together? Could the covenant survive without the infusion of new wine, a renewed commitment of good faith? And like God had always done, when Israel had broken faith, God once again breathes life into the relationship through new wine, the new wine of Jesus Christ. If you think you're hearing echoes of last Sunday's communion service, you're right: "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins." In this story in John, Jesus is already pouring himself into our midst; he is the wine God will use to keep the relationship going.

This is the sign then that Jesus worked in Cana of Galilee, that where God is concerned, where God's people are concerned, God not only keeps God's promises, but that the best is always yet to come. What was it the steward said to the groom?: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Not only is the party not over, but the best is yet to come; the good wine has arrived and it will just keep coming. God does not parcel out a watered down grace when we are watered down people, or bestow an inferior blessing when we are an

ungrateful people, but brings out the best even if we are not deserving, even if we are already drunk, to use the language of the story. The sign of God's grace was revealed in the reminder that with God, the best is always yet to come.

Now, in this story, everything turns out great, the host's honor is not only saved but enhanced, and God's glory is revealed, but let's be clear that saying the best is yet to come does not mean that everything will turn out rosy in our lives. This is not a spin on a gospel of prosperity. Rather, it is the content of our hope, the belief that God has the best in mind for us even if we don't fully understand what it is, or even if we don't recognize it when it is staring us in the face, or even if we don't want to wait for it! The story of the Bible is one that affirms this time and again, both when times are good and when they are tough. Just when we thought it couldn't get any better after the sixth day, when we humans were created and God called us good, there was the seventh day, the day of rest, the reminder that we are not made only to toil but to enjoy God and all God's blessings. And just when Israel thought it couldn't get any worse than decades of exile in Babylon, God moved the Persian King Cyrus' heart to let those exiles go home again. Just when the disciples were beginning to think their faith in Christ had been in vain, he rose from the grave, and if that wasn't good enough, the Holy Spirit came just as promised. You see, the best is always yet to come. But at the same time, after the seventh day, we sinned. After the temple was rebuilt, the Romans conquered next. After the Holy Spirit came, the church still had its share of conflicts. It is not that

the best that is coming makes everything perfect. It is that God still gives us the best despite our circumstances.

We were reminded again this holiday season of the statistics that tell us that depression and suicide rates are considerably higher in the months of November and December. While others are festive, these persons despair. It is not to pass judgment on those who have sought a sorrowful solution to their problems to say that they had lost the ability to see that the best is yet to come in their lives, but perhaps these tragic statistics should be a challenge to those of us who do know the best is yet to come to live that truth in such a way as to allow the hopeless to see it in us. Are you expecting that the best is yet to come in your life, or that your best days are behind you? That God's glory awaits you or that you should only expect divine leftovers? Are you living like God has already dished out the entirety of your allotment of grace?

I am well aware that it sounds platitudinous to stand here and preach to you to live like you believe the best is yet to come. I am blessed that in my life right now, I am facing no major illnesses, financial crises, or failing relationships that might make it easier for me to forget that the best is yet to come. But isn't that the catch for many of us? Isn't that the trap of affluenza, the thinking that maybe this is as good as it gets and therefore I've got to go to every length to protect everything I have. It's when we do that that we begin to live as though God's already given us the best and that there's nothing else to look forward to, or worse, that God's best

might conflict with our best, and ask of us something we'd really rather not give. In either case, we've begun to live without hope, and isn't despair always just a few steps behind lagging hope?

It also seems hard to talk about this stuff without it sounding like a doctrine of the power of positive thinking or a theology of the silver lining, you know, if we just look on the bright side, have a positive attitude, we can weather any storm, if we just look for the good in any situation, that will carry us through. As useful as these ways of approaching life may be, they are not hope. They are not hope because they are things we do and ways we behave, not ways God acts in history, in our lives. Sure, God may lead us to see the silver lining in an unfortunate situation, but Jesus didn't just point out to the wineless wedding guests at Cana, "Well, at least now we can enjoy some of that nice lemonade!" and God didn't say to an Israel that was suffering, "Well, if you just try a little harder, everything will be OK." No, God acted in Jesus Christ, giving new wine, and renewing the covenant.

It is in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that we see the difference between our hope and our wishful thinking. Our hope is grounded in the promises of God, the fulfilled promises of God that give us confidence in those yet to be fulfilled. We remember the fulfilled promises of liberation from Egypt, those celebrated to this day in the Passover feast. We remember the fulfilled promises of a land flowing with milk and honey, a land people are still fighting for on the basis

of the memory of that ancient gift. We remember the promises of a messiah, and of that messiah's promises that he would rise on the third day, and then send the Holy Spirit in his absence, and each of those promises has been kept. And so we have confidence that when the Scriptures say that Jesus Christ is the firstborn of the dead, that means we will be subsequently resurrected in the fullness of time. We have confidence that when Jesus says that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly and eternally, we will have abundant and eternal lives. In each of those promises, God has acted and will act and no amount of positive thinking on our part is going to change that. Living in the light of those promises, my friends, is pure hope.

The power today of this story of the wedding in Cana is the same as the power of the sign Jesus did in the first place, to reveal to us or to remind us that our hope in God is never misplaced. No matter whether we are riding high, or running low, God's promises are reliable, and the best is always yet to come. This is as true in the life of ECF or any other church, as it is for each of us individually. Our best days are ahead of us, and ahead of those days are even better days, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts, when Christ comes again, just as promised. Amen.