

WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE FINEST OF WINE

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 19, 2025

Jesus' transforming water into wine. In the Christian faith we speak of wine using terms like transubstantiation, and real presence and remembrance. Metaphorically the wine of Christ provides us so much.

Wine. It warms the body, gladdens the heart, and brings people together. When there is wine, there is often laughter and joy and love and tears and deep conversation. Some wines are much better than others. Today's story is about much more than water and wine. There is a deeper meaning, a grander story found there. It is a story about human limitations, and how Jesus provides what is way beyond our wildest dreams. Let's revisit the scene that day.

The parents had pulled out all the stops as they began the preparations for their child's wedding. They reached out to Cana's Rabbi to set a date before getting to work on the extensive guest list. Then there was the hiring of a chef and wine steward. This was going to be a celebration that all of Cana, and the surrounding villages would remember for years to come. Almost no cost was too great for this once in a lifetime grand event.

They went to work on the guest list, beginning with the immediate family and the cousins and uncles and aunts and good friends and business associates. Mary was on that list from nearby Nazareth. And then there was her son to consider. Her son, what an impressive young man he was turning

out to be! A teacher whose words and very presence burned in the minds and souls of the people. Yeshua and his disciples must be invited too. As the parents searched for a wine steward, they stumbled across one whose skill was legendary. They had heard from many about the rare wines he could locate, and his matchless gift in subtly pairing exquisite wines with fruit and herbs and cheese and lamb.

After being hired, the chef and wine steward went to work rounding up the food and wine for this seven-day feast. As the steward searched the finest vineyards, he had no way of knowing that right there among the guests was the greatest vintner who had ever lived, whose skill with wine was beyond compare; whose ability could never be matched.

As the festivities commenced, food was consumed, and wine sipped and savored. There was sacred liturgy and music and joy and laughter and sleep and more celebration – until something went terribly wrong. The wine had somehow run out. The host was mortified. The steward beside himself.

Mary went straight to her son to apprise him of the situation. Jesus, the greatest of all vintner's spoke to his mother: "Dear woman, that's not our problem, my time has not yet come." Well, Mary was a woman who would not take "no" for an answer. She simply turned to the servants and told them to do whatever Jesus asked.

Here's what we read in the Gospel passage: "Standing nearby were six stone water jars, used for Jewish ceremonial washing. Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, 'Fill the jars with water.' When the

jars had been filled, he said, 'Now dip some out, and take it to the [steward].' So the servants followed his instructions. When the [steward] tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. 'A host always serves the best wine first,' he said. 'Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!'"

At the wedding feast the host had relied on the steward choosing enough of the very best wine, and enough of the cheaper stuff. As the feast commenced, the people were impressed with the quality of wine purchased. But they really didn't know the finest vintage until that day when Jesus shockingly sent twelve large stone jars of water to the wine steward for tasting. The steward was proud that day of finding the finest wines for miles around. But now, he was tasting something extraordinary! He had no idea where it came from. And he could not understand why THIS wine of all wine, had only shown up after the guests were already mildly inebriated, when they would be less capable of recognizing how miraculous this wine was.

Now, let me dabble a bit into symbolism and metaphor. Jesus, the greatest of all vintner's, was able to produce the very best wine, because he was not just an excellent vintner, as the scriptures reveal, he himself was the grapevine from which the wine is produced. In the gospel Jesus says, I am the vine and my father the vine grower.

This interplay of literal and metaphorical wine produced by and in Jesus Christ, is absolutely unlike any other, because it comes from his very being, his very essence. We saw this at his last meal with his disciples in that upper room when he picked up the bread and said, this is my body. Then he picked up a cup of wine, offered it to them and said: "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood...which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." We see this imagery spoken of in our Eucharistic Prayer. At the moment of the epiclesis; the moment when the Holy Spirit is called down on the bread and the wine, these words are said over bread and wine: "Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him." In that moment we are calling down the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine that they may become, for us, the food and drink of unending life in Christ. This is no mere symbol or metaphor, but a mysterious and profound reality.

But there is more here that is also symbol and metaphor in the wine. Wine is symbolic of the presence of Christ, and all that Christ offers us. What does Christ offer? One day in the scriptures Jesus was approached by the mother of James and John with a request. She asked that her two sons would be able to sit at the places of honor, at Jesus' right hand and left hand in his kingdom. Jesus responded to these two disciples: "'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup.'" What was this cup that they, and Jesus, would drink? It was the cup of suffering that they, and all of the disciples, would surely consume. They would all eventually drink that cup of wine; the cup of danger and suffering.

Homer's Iliad speaks of "wine-dark seas," referring to storms and danger. The writer Caroline Alexander spoke of Homer's wine-dark sea as being that place where not only danger is found, but also home, and sustenance, and abundance, and a connection to the outside world.

It is no wonder to me that the wine that Jesus produced from water at the wedding that day was of superior quality than any other. Because it contained exquisite hints and notes and aroma and flavor. Literally and symbolically Christ offers us wine that contains hints of home, notes of nourishment, the aroma of abundance, and a flavorful connection to the world around us – along with the bitter taste of suffering.

The symbolic wine that Christ offers us to drink, contains this:

- A hint of home to dwell, here and now, in God's presence where we can be safe and comfortable and at ease.
- His wine provides notes of nourishment. The wine of Jesus Christ sustains our whole being; body, mind, soul, and spirit.
- The wine of Jesus Christ provides an aroma of abundance. Jesus said it well with these words: "I have come that you may have life, and life in its fullest!"
- Just as Jesus Christ is connected to all of creation, when we drink of Christ, we take in a flavorful connection to all of humanity and all of creation.
- And lastly, when we drink Christ's cup of wine, we also drink the bitter taste of sharing in his suffering. When we go through suffering, it is not a sign of God's absence, but the very opposite, of God's presence. God is present with us, and experiences with us our darkest moments.

Drink this wine, all of you. As you drink; as it infuses you entire being, literally in the Eucharist, and metaphorically in Christ's presence every day, you will find nourishment, and home, and fullness of life, and a connection to ALL, along with suffering.

Come. Drink.