

## **“Empty”** (John 2:1-11)

One cup of water, this was the socially accepted amount that was offered to someone as they entered a home of any good Jewish person. One cup of water to wash away the dirt and dust and grime that would gather on hands and face and feet. One cup of water was offered to refresh and renew you after your journey. One cup of water to help make you presentable to your host and one cup of water was an obligation of hospitality. This resonates with us today when we take this one cup of water, filter through some ground coffee beans and serve it warm to company; we are being a good host, right? But this one cup of water was about something else, something deeper. To take the water and wash with it was an important purification ritual, especially in the Jewish faith before a sacred moment like a wedding. One cup of water, sixteen cups in a gallon, twenty to thirty gallon stone jugs empty and tossed aside in the house means conservatively one thousand nine hundred twenty guests at this wedding party in Cana. That's a lot of people. I am still trying to break one hundred friends on my Facebook page. Amid the crowd, here is Jesus and his newly called disciples, enjoying the feast, getting to know each other better, sharing stories and participating in the wedding party that would have lasted a whole week.

And then the wine gives out, runs dry and the wineskins are as empty as those stone jars by the front door of the house. There is no Woodman's down the block to run discretely out in order to buy more wine. Just as one cup of water was the obligation of any host, making sure there was plenty of food and wine did not originate with Emily Post or Martha Steward. This was a hospitality nightmare, people would talk, and facetiously whisper about the time the wine ran out at your wedding party. And Jesus' mother is one of the first to notice. And while we don't know what kind of connection Jesus' family had to the groom, since we don't even know who the bride and groom are in the first place; Jesus' mother still wants to help the host save face. Tapping Jesus on the shoulder she wants him to help out. It is easy to get caught up in Jesus' odd, if not slightly terse response, but that is not really what this passage is about and in the end this conversation is really more reflective of the Gospel of John quirky writing style. Jesus does comply and tells the servants to fill the empty stone jugs that were used to cleanse people as they came for the wedding, washing away the remnants of travel and making themselves clean, do you hear the baptismal images here? Fill those jugs with water. From where, you might wonder, but John does not seem all that concerned with details that might lead us astray from the point of this moment. Filled with water, drawing a cup full, the servant takes it to the head waiter at the party and one sip and you know this is no Mogan David wine, this is the stuff that comes from a wine list where you can either choose to drink a glass or to pay your mortgage.

The Gospel of John loves symbols and reading commentaries about John can start to sound like a Dan Brown novel minus a plot line. Scholars positing different thoughts on what this or that might means. But, it often feels like groping in the dark for an elusive switch so you could flood this veiled narrative with a kind of light where we would all agree, “Oh, that's what John is saying.” However, we simply don't have all the information we need historically or culturally or even religiously about Judaism in the late first century to realize all the different levels John weaves together. So, what are we left with, what does the passage have to say to us today?

First, this is a story about a family that almost lost it all and possibly never realized it. Moreover, how many people emptying their glass of the old wine, with only a few remnants roaming, rolling around the bottom of their cup filled with new wine and never realized the mystery of what had happened. How often do we miss out on the sign and the sacred stirring in our midst? More than I can count within my own life. I get caught up in my life and rituals and obligations and I sometimes wonder how God can even burst through my over structured schedule, let alone get a word in edgewise. In living the incarnation, sorting out what leads us closer to God and what creates distance and what we might miss is a full time occupation for those of us seeking to follow the wine changer Jesus. There is no spiritual shortcut I've found, yet. Persistent prayer, trying to listen fully to others around, trying to look into the eyes of people here at the church and the cashier at the grocery store, these every day practices are about the best I've stumbled across. So, be alert and aware and faithfully, prayerfully awake to each moment might be one possible discipleship lesson from this narrative.

Another is God's abundance in a moment of sacristy. To be sure, this is a theme that like water flows through scripture. How many times do the Israelites complain that there is not food or water, well it really is most of the book of Exodus. Elijah reassures a widow that her meal jar will not be emptied if she shares with him. The wine running out is a wilderness, sacristy; the sky is falling kind of moment. We live in a time of increasing sacristy. We worry rightfully so about jobs and money and even the environment. We saw this week the horror and were reminded again of the abject poverty of so many, too many, in Haiti. And yet, in tension with that, are outpourings of compassion found in casseroles offered to homeless men or cups of hot chocolate to ECHO clients or breakfast to children. Gestures some might call small but have the power to show abundance in this time. Gestures some might call small but have the power to sustain and share God's love. The wine in an excess calls us to not miss God's presence and beckons us to share in the abundance of God with those around us. Just as the wine was offered to all those present whether they realized where it came from or not, so too we offer our presence to others whether they realize where we come from or not.

Finally, I find myself drawn to this image of an empty stone jar used in a ritual, which John might be offering as a challenge to us to be careful about our own rituals less they become empty. Pause for a moment and complete this sentence in your mind. *It is not worship for me without \_\_\_\_\_* (fill in blank). Maybe organ music or hymns or seeing a friend or offering a hug or sharing a cup of coffee or finally reaching that moment I say the word "gusto," you know its going to happen. In order to keep our worship alive and engaging and relevant, we have to start talking about what is meaningful and where are the empty stone jars just waiting to be filled with new wine that can bless our short time together. Blaise Pascal wrote, "Our thirst for God will never be satisfied by taking an eye-dropper full of divine love and dribbling it onto our tongues...We want to swing out on a rope over the river and let go, and splash naked into the deep delightful pool...that is our thirst for God"<sup>1</sup> When are we offering you a dropper full when you thirst to plunge face first? How can you help us in worship, which is our work together not just my job, to make this time together as meaningful and life giving and challenging as we can? Worship needs \_\_\_\_\_ (blank), feel free to email me or call me or write it down on your thought on your bulletin this morning and hand it to me.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote found in a sermon by Susan Andrews, "Is God Invited?" Lectionary Homiletics, vol. XXI, #1, pg. 62

Friends, if we are called to immerse ourselves in God's abundance, if we are to notice God's movement in our midst and share that with others, if we are to offer a hurting, broken world a place where God's presence is tangible, it will take the work of all of us together. But, I am convinced that this is our calling in this place and in this time. Friends, the empty jars are waiting for us to fill with our lives and offer to those in this world, let us start filling them right now.

May it be so for you and for me. Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen"!