

Westminster Sermon – “An Extravagant Gift”

Sunday, January 17, 2016

Scripture Readings – Psalm 36:5-10, John 2:1-12

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Psalm 36:5-10, calls us to thankfulness for God’s rich abundance to all times and places. God’s unconditional love renews and restores us, even in our lowest moments, when the wine runs out. The psalmist makes generous use of the Hebrew word *hesed*, translated in the many phrases that refer to God’s unfailing, continuing love which never runs out! May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of ancient Hebrew Scripture.

*5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. 6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. 7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. 8 They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. 9 For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. 10 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!*

Our second scripture reading is John 2:1-12. In this story unique to John’s gospel, an interaction between Jesus and his mother at a wedding in Cana leads to events that offer a glimpse into who Jesus is, his character and the meaning of Jesus’ ministry. What is truly amazing in this story is the abundance of wine Jesus offers. 150 gallons of the highest quality wine flowed from the six empty stone jars. Hear now God’s holy word as it is recorded in the gospel.

*1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "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." 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. 12 After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.*

The title of the sermon: “An Extravagant Gift”

The text: “But you have kept the good wine until now.” John 2:9b

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for surprising us with the extravagance of your love and mercy, filling our emptiness, transforming the water of our lives into wine, time and time again. Amen.

Jewish weddings are rich with ritual. I had the privilege of co-officiating at one such wedding in St. Louis when a daughter of Webster Groves Presbyterian Church married a Jewish man and asked me to join her under the wedding canopy with her husband-to-be and his Rabbi. The four-poled canopy with open sides and a covered roof creates a small sanctuary. The space underneath is set aside as sacred to remind the couple to create sacred space every day in their relationship with each other.

The breaking of the wine glass at the end of the ceremony reminds the couple of life's fragile nature and the need for healing and forgiveness in the broken places on their journey together.

Perhaps these rituals were a part of the ceremony Jesus witnessed in Cana that day. John tells us the wine was flowing freely as they celebrated this sacred beginning. Then the unspeakable happens: the wine runs out. One can imagine this would be cause for great embarrassment. It is a social crisis, if nothing more. However, in this time and culture, it would have brought shame on the family.

*When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."*

Let's reflect for a moment on the interaction between Jesus and his mother. Over the years, preachers have interpreted the tone of Jesus' response as disrespectful, almost as if he is putting a busybody in her place. *"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?"*

This interpretation has always disturbed me. It felt like another put down to women, something that is too often a part of the culture of religion. Theologian Gail O'Day notes that although these words "sound harsh to the modern ear," within the context they are "neither rude nor hostile." Jesus often referred to women as "woman" and "what concern is that to you or to me?" acknowledges the problem is not theirs to solve as guests. Mary and Jesus both understand this. It is out of genuine concern for her friend and host that Mary says anything at all to Jesus.

I will never forget the kindness of a dear friend and neighbor, Judy Rubenstein, at our son Paul's baptismal party years ago, who offered to send her husband Jerry home for some fresh salmon when we were running out. The quality of her salmon was superior to what I served and the festivities were enriched by her thoughtful generosity, something many of the guests never knew about.

The interaction between Jesus and his mom reveals a relationship of respect and affection. Jesus is an adult, about to venture into his ministry. Although he listens to and respects his mother, Jesus must be guided by his inner calling from God and not by any human claim or authority. His mother understands this. In fact, this is the goal of every mother; to empower our children to make their own choices, not guided by the noise of the culture or the speech of their friends, but by their inner voice which is in tune with the loving and just God to whom they belong.

Jesus' mother instructs the servants to listen to her son, not knowing what he would do but trusting he would act from within himself...and the first sign of Jesus' ministry is recorded in the gospel of John. The extravagant gift of Jesus goes way beyond meeting the needs of the moment for health, safety or saving face. In this story, the gift encompasses the celebration of life itself. The One who is the source of life, the One whose love and mercy are beyond our comprehension is in our midst quietly transforming circumstances, without drawing attention to himself. Only the servants, the disciples, Jesus' mother, and those of us who have the privilege of reading the gospel of John know what transpired at the wedding in Cana.

*John understands that to believe in Jesus as the Christ is to live a life within a life. Nothing is changed, but everything is changed. What had been water is wine. Word has become flesh. In this Word and Light of God who is a man, all is new. How else can this transformation be conveyed except in quiet parables of cosmic change? (Interpretation, Gerard Sloyan)*

This weekend our country honors The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who walked with him to transform the injustice of segregation. It all began with the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955 and a courageous Rosa Parks, who had run out of wine after a long day at work and who refused to give up her seat in the first row of the colored seating to a white man when the white seating had become full.

The empty city buses on the following Monday morning symbolized the beginning of a transformation that would change the way of life in our country. A change that did not come easy... did not come without walking shoes, without great personal sacrifice, without endurance and the ability to organize, without unity of spirit and voice speaking truth to power and without the mercy and grace of God, who walked among us. We honor Dr. King, the person who inspired that transformation through his leadership, grateful for the abundance of wine that has flowed from those empty stone jars of segregation...and mindful that we still have some walking to do on the journey toward full equality.

I would like to close with a story by Isak Dinesen, the author of “Out of Africa.” It is called “Babette’s Feast” and Gabriel Axel turned it into an Oscar winning film.

On the desolate coast of Denmark lived Martina and Philippa, the beautiful daughters of a devout clergyman who preached salvation through self-denial. Both girls sacrifice youthful passions to faith and duty, and even many years after their father’s death, they keep the austere teachings alive among a small group of their father’s followers who remain.

Their life changes when they welcome Babette, a mysterious refugee from France’s civil war as their servant, a favor to one of the young men they rejected years ago. Babette, a former master chef, learns their austere dietary practices and faithfully performs her duties. They are not accustomed to being served and yet eventually find her presence in their lives invaluable.

Babette wins the lottery and as a way of expressing her gratitude to the sisters and their small group of followers, she prepares a gourmet French meal for them—an extravagant gift!!!

As the evening evolves, and the wine flows freely and generously—some of the best wine in France—there is a sense of gratitude and joy that fills the hearts of the guests. One of the guests at the feast gives a toast. He toasts the celebration of life itself, with its losses and disappointments... lived in the embrace of God’s infinite mercy. With these words he lifts his glass of wine!

*Mercy and truth have met each other.*

*Righteousness and bliss shall kiss each other.*

*Man in his weakness trembles at the choices he makes, but no...*

*You come to realize Mercy is infinite!!*

*We need only await it with confidence...*

*and receive it with gratitude!!*

In the celebration of life, we can dance because we have mourned! We can live anew because along the way a part of us has died! We can drink the wine transformed from the emptiness we have known. We can rejoice because we have shed tears in the embrace of a loving and merciful God.

To live our lives in the hands of the potter is an extravagant gift indeed!! Thanks be to God. Amen.