

January 14, 2007  
Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11  
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“When the Wine Runs Out”

When we lived in Norfolk, Bunny and I hosted a dinner party for some friends who were moving away to a retirement home. We invited to the party some people whom we did not know well, but who were close friends of the honorees. The situation made it a somewhat formal, dressy affair - a seated dinner with china, linens, flowers and all the works. The house was clean; our young children were in bed; the table was set and the hors d'oeuvres were served. Just before inviting everyone into the dining room for dinner, we realized that we had forgotten to cook the rice for the poulet à l'estragon (tarragon chicken). Not only had we forgotten to cook the rice; we didn't have any rice. Neither the oatmeal nor the grits in the pantry seemed appetizing with French cuisine. So we hatched a plan. As I went back to the living room to stall for time, I heard Bunny fly out of the kitchen, throw open the garage door and scour the neighborhood for rice. Thank God for neighbors with minute rice.

No matter how carefully we plan a party, an elegant dinner, a special trip or a wedding, something is sure to go wrong. One day I plan to write down all the wedding disasters I have experienced or heard about as a minister. (Like some of Mark Twain's writings, it won't be able to be printed until I am dead and gone.)

Early in his gospel, John tells of wedding disaster in Cana of Galilee. Jesus, his family and his disciples have all been invited to the happy celebration. The family has prepared a long time for this special event. Suddenly, Mary hears from the servants that the wine has run out. Imagine the embarrassment of the wedding party as the guests learn there is no more wine. In spite of all the careful planning, the party is about to die on its feet.

Mary immediately brings the situation to the attention of Jesus. Jesus makes that awkward response, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour is not yet come.” To our ears, his response sounds rude, like a slap in the face to his mother. It is not rude; it is an idiomatic expression. On the surface, Jesus is saying that the problem of no wine is none of their business. Yet, something more is going on. Mary seems to know that Jesus will act, for she tells the servants to do whatever he asks them to do. Is all we have here an example of Jesus obeying his mother even if he thinks she is meddling in someone else's business? Is Jesus simply acting against his better judgment to save his friends from embarrassment? Is Jesus using his spiritual power to keep a party from dying? No, something greater is happening here.

At every point in John's gospel the actions and dialogue operate on many levels. On the surface there is a party with no more wine and a guest who can work a miracle by changing water into the best wine. On the deeper level, there is a people who have run out of the wine of God's grace and a guest who can satisfy their thirst with a lavish gift of the wine of abundant life. God had said through the prophet Isaiah that the land will no longer be spoken of as forsaken. The land will be married. Just as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall God rejoice over the people.

It is no accident that Jesus is at a wedding feast. Jesus is the bridegroom who has come to his bride, Israel. It is no accident that the water jars that are filled with wine are huge water jars used for the ritual of purifica-

tion. The wine that Jesus brings in great abundance - 120 to 160 gallons of wine (far more than is needed for a wedding) - is the cleansing wine of his blood. The wine of the old ritual no longer cleanses; the wine of Jesus cleanses, forgives and brings new life. It is no accident that John tells us this wedding happened on the "third day." The time is a subtle reference to the life that will flow from the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is no accident that John places the story of the miracle at the wedding in Cana as the first of all Jesus' mighty signs. It is a sign of what is to come. God's glory is revealed in Jesus. No, it is not yet time for God's glory in Jesus Christ to be fully revealed. The full revelation of God's glory will come in the cross. Yet, the abundance of new life cannot be contained. Even at the first public appearance of Jesus, life overflows and spills out into a fountain of grace. In John's gospel, we discover that, immediately after the outpouring of grace in Cana, Jesus cleanses the Temple. The new wine is poured into the world and the wineskin of the old rituals cannot contain it.

If we live only on the surface of life, we cannot see what God is doing among us. If we trust only in our carefully executed plans, we will not be open to the outpouring of God's grace. Sometimes, it is only when the wine runs out that we see the lavishness of God's grace clearly for the first time. As my friend, Dr. Richard Boyce, once expressed it, "When the wine runs out, the real party begins."

In every life, there are times when it seems that life has lost its meaning; the familiar rituals and relationships no longer hold for us the weight and consequence they once did. In those moments, life becomes a fruitless celebration with no wine, no hope and no joy.

Matthew Arnold, in his poem "Dover Beach," laments how empty human faith has become. At Dover, the poet looks out over the English Channel and compares the condition of human faith to the ebb of the tide.

#### The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full,  
and round earth's shore Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear It's melancholy, long withdrawing roar, Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear And naked shingles of the world.

There are times when the wine runs out. A young woman graduates from college full of dreams for the future. Hard economic times mean that she cannot find a job in her field, much less any job. The wine has run out. A man looks forward to retirement in order to be able to have the time to do the things that he and his wife have always dreamed of doing only to find, three months after retiring, that he has cancer. The wine has run out. I remember a family I knew some years ago in another city. The family lived a life that seemed almost charmed. Everything appeared to go well for them. The parents had good jobs. They lived in a beautiful home. The children did well in school, in music and in athletics. Doors opened before them; they succeeded at everything they tried. I believe that even faith came easily to them. They were active in the church and never questioned anything. Until, one day, everything seemed to fall apart. I don't know what happened first. Maybe it was the father's loss of a job, or the drinking, or the older son's involvement with drugs or the mother's hospitalization for depression. The long party was over as suddenly as it had begun. The wine had run out of their lives.

In Ibsen's play, "Ghosts," Mrs. Alving perceives how trapped people's lives have become by empty convention and the burden of the past. Mrs. Alving speaks to the Pastor, "I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of dead beliefs and things of that kind... And we are so miserably afraid of the light." (Quoted in *The Theatre of Revolt*, p.68)

Jesus came to dispel “all sorts of dead ideas and all kinds of dead beliefs.” For Jesus is the light. He is the wine of life that flows free when we run out of all of our own resources, when we quit trusting in our own schemes, when we recognize our need and when accept our weaknesses. He comes to surprise us with a whole new way of living.

The miracle of Cana tells us that God can transform our loneliness into new communion, the desert of our despair into the fertile soil of new hope and our dead ends into new paths to travel. It will never be the same again. We cannot go back to the way things were. Our losses are real. Our grief is sharp. Yet, there is another way.

The 17th century Italian astronomer Galileo had a daughter named Sister Maria Celeste, who lived in a small Florentine convent under a vow of poverty. During her life, she kept up a close correspondence with her father. Once, during a time of plague, Galileo was worried about his health, his inability to get his writings published and many other concerns. His daughter wrote him, “I beseech you not to grasp the knife of these current troubles and misfortunes by its sharp edge, lest you let it injure you that way, but rather, seizing it by the blunt side, use it to excise all the imperfections you may recognize in yourself, so that you rise above the obstacles... seeing and touching with your own hands the truth that only in blessed God...can we find real peace.” (Galileo’s Daughter, p. 208)

Sooner or later, the wine of life runs out. The gospel tells us that when the wine runs out, the real party begins. An individual, a family, a congregation, a community, can let go of empty forms, past disappointments, dead ideas, old wounds, broken dreams and drink deeply the new wine of God’s abundant grace.