

“Communal Living: Receiving the Bounty” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church January 21, 2007

TEXT: John 2:1-11 1On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." 4"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." 5His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.^[a] 7Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. 8Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, 9and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." 11This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and the disciples put their faith in him.

A MINISTER is driving home from a wedding reception one day. He is pulled over by Highway Patrol. The officer smells alcohol on his breath and notices the minister's speech is some what slurred, and so he says, "Sir, have you been drinking?" And the minister says, "Just water." The officer says, "Then why do I smell wine?" And the minister looks away and ponders this for a moment, then turns to the officer and says, "Good Lord, He's done it again!"

That's not a true confession by the way. I actually prefer another wine to water story that happened on the Johnny Carson Tonight Show years and years ago. He was interviewing an eight year old boy who had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia. The boy mentioned that he attended Sunday School. Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday School?" "Last week," came the reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience roared, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. He continued, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It seems he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

Make sure you invite Jesus! The story of Cana reminds us why. In the first three Gospels, Jesus starts his ministry by preaching. In John, however, Jesus' ministry opens with a miracle of abundant gifts and grace. Instead of having Jesus say, "The kin-dom of God is at hand," John has him demonstrate it. Jesus offers a sign instead of a speech, and makes wine, about 800 bottles of wine, a ridiculously extravagant amount of wine. And in the grace-filled abundance of the wine, Jesus makes visible the presence of God. He shows up at a festive family occasion. A wedding was a major social event, often lasting days. It provided welcome relief from an otherwise drab and difficult existence, and it reminded the people of God's love; it underscored the strength of community; and it embraced hope and future. And when the wine ran out, Jesus stepped in to demonstrate God's truth of an unlimited supply of grace.

Many of you have heard me say that you get a lot more out of the New Testament if you have a good grasp of the Old Testament, and this is one of those times -- because wine is a theologically loaded substance. At the end of the book of Amos, which is a brutally pessimistic book, there is a short proclamation of a hopeful future. And one of the things that is said there is that there will come a day when the mountains will drip sweet wine, a time when there is abundance and what is ruined will be rebuilt with much celebration. There are other passages like that in the prophets, and in some of the later Jewish writings that didn't make it into the Bible—by the time of Jesus, abundance of good wine was believed to be a sign of the messianic age. When the disciples saw Jesus turn water into fine wine—better than the wedding host had served even at the beginning of the party—they remembered this, and a light came on in their minds.

With this simple wedding story, we have the certainty that with Jesus, the ordinary, will become extraordinary. Jesus will take baptismal water and turn it into copious quality wine, drawing the anointed individual into contest of community and blessing that community with adventure, abundance, purpose, fulfillment. As we get ready for our Annual Meeting, as we prepare for a time apart, a time of sabbatical, a time of newness and adventure, let's make sure we invite Jesus!

For the life to which John's Jesus would invite us, is one filled with laughter bubbling from the soles of our feet, perhaps tears at times, even anger and struggle. But overall, this life is defined by a joyous passion that comes from yielding to God's Spirit in our lives. God does not approve of frowning or cynical saints. God wants us to be a people who lean on one another, and hold each other; who practice our own individuality, yes; but who preserve the web of relationships, and the sacredness of each and every person, both those we know and those we'd rather not know.

God yearns for us each to experience joy. For each of you, and those in the world to whom you minister, God wants a rich, life-embracing existence. As you continue the journey over the coming months, you will do well to remember this promise of joy and this call to community. You will need to tell one another your delights and concerns, and listen to each other. You will need to look for Christ in your sister, your brother, even in yourselves, even in the folks with whom you feel uncomfortable. You will need to recall that God makes you a community of New Creation, New Being. God offers you abundant wine and abundant life, life without fear.

Indeed, the Spirit who powered Jesus, who kept the feet dancing and the wine flowing, powers each of us. The Spirit who helps us walk the walk of authenticity and then, at the end of life, who helps us walk one another home, is the same Spirit who can Now we intoxicate us, wipe away the tears, and let bathe us in celebration of life. This is not always easy to do. Communal life (that is, life in communion with God and with one another) requires sacrifice and priorities that are inconvenient if not uncomfortable. There is a Nigerian folk tale about how the tribal chief sent messengers to invite all the men of the tribe to a great feast, sorry women, in this culture the tribal leaders were all men!). "The food will be provided but each man must bring a jug of palm wine." Now, one of the men, Lacona, wanted very much to go to the great festival but he had no wine.

He paced the floor, trying to think of a solution for his dilemma. Finally, his wife suggested, "You could buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive, for such a great occasion." "How foolish," Lacona cried, "to spend money when there is a way to go, free." Once again, he paced until he came upon a plan: "Rather than wine, I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred men will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great pot of wine?"

On the day of the feast, the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, reminding the men of the great festival. All of them came, dressed in their finest clothes. By midmorning, they had gathered at the home of the chief. As each man entered the tribal grounds, he poured his jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Lacona carefully poured his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers. When all the guests had arrived, the chief commanded the music to cease. He ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. As the chief spoke the ritual blessing and opening words of the festival, all the guests raised their glasses and drank. Suddenly a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd, and they quickly drank again. Now, what they tasted, was not wine, but water! It seems each guest had decided that his one jug of water could not spoil the great pot of palm wine.

This is the polar opposite of our Gospel story! Don't you be the ones to hold back, to put water into the wine, especially during the next four months. In Corinthians, Paul talked about the different gifts each of us brings to the world – these are not gifts to be hoarded. These are gifts that are represented by abundant wine, and part of our job is to do the treasure hunt that helps us discover these gifts and then to use them in service.

Are you, ready to lift the cup of abundant wine? What gives you joy? What helps you feel God's presence? What were you doing when the Spirit breathed down your neck? Are you ready to accept the assignment of your gifts? Some are noted in the passage from First Corinthians: healing, working miracles, prophecy, and others. Many are not listed. Leading a good meeting is a gift; so is baking a brownie. Picking up a member who can't get to Sunday worship is a gift, helping at Laguna Grove or Jazz Vespers or labyrinth is a gift, and so is handing out the bulletins with a smile that says "Welcome!"

Just like the Nigerian folk tale, we also have a story about a great party with wine. God has given us gifts, and Jesus offers us abundant grace and strength to use those gifts. The first step is for us to gather our gifts, discern them, describe them. The second is to understand God has a purpose: our gifts are assignments from God. And finally, when those gifts are brought together to proclaim life with Jesus, a great community of joy is created and God's love shines.

Consider your gifts this week: consider your assignments. Together, we are indeed just what is said in our service of Holy Communion: the gifts of God for the people of God.