

An Idea Whose Time Has Come
John 2:1-11
Northminster Presbyterian Church
January 14, 2017
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

(Scripture is read.)

“When the wine gave out...” At a time when things should be great — a wedding the joining of two families, the creation of a new family and a new community — a lack of preparation, not caring enough about the guests or an excess of revelry has put the hosts of the wedding in a terrible bind. It’s not that you can’t have fun without wine. It’s that in that and many other cultures, not having enough wine or food or whatever the source of revelry is, displays a lack of hospitality, a lack of care and concern for the guests in your midst.

I have to be honest with you. These last couple of weeks, when I look at the world or I look at our country, it seems sometimes as though the wine has given out. Animosity reigns. Indigent children face the prospect of losing their healthcare in a matter of weeks. Practically on the eighth anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti, the powers that be announce that those Haitians we welcomed into the US after the disaster will no longer be welcome. And the same goes for the Salvadorans who have been here for almost 20 years, and it goes for others too.

At a time when US wealth, measured at least in part by market capitalization, on paper anyway, has had one of its largest leaps in history, we are deciding that people who came to this land from nations in the midst of political and economic and natural disasters and turmoil, who have worked hard and begun to rebuild lives and make a place for themselves, will be sent back to nations that are still destitute, still politically unstable. The wine of our compassion has apparently given out.

And it doesn’t stop there. Events that are supposed to unite us and demonstrate our national unity in the midst of diversity have become symbols of our national brokenness — from the Kennedy Center Honors to the celebrations this weekend honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we’ve shown how we can’t even be in the same room or at the same event anymore with people we disagree with. The wine of our hospitality has apparently given out.

And then we remember a mother, not Mary, not yet. We remember Michelene Joassaint. On that fateful day in Haiti eight years ago this week, she had just put her 11-day-old daughter down for her afternoon nap when the earthquake struck. She attempted to run to the bedroom to retrieve Elisabeth, but the second story of the house began to collapse on her head and her path was blocked. She managed to get outside and spent the next seven days grieving with her husband in a makeshift camp set up in a nearby football field.

But they didn't realize that a French team of rescue workers was going building by building on their old block. Half-way around the world from home, they worked with speed and agility and with stethoscopes, carefully digging by hand to prevent the debris from shifting, needing silence to pinpoint the location of any signs of life. That French rescue team heard faint cries and worked for a day until they found Elisabeth, under the debris, curled up on her bed in a tiny hollow a little larger than the size of two soccer balls. The baby was dehydrated, but otherwise uninjured.

And the wine flows rich and clear. It was a miracle, at least by most people's standards. Inspired by the very simple idea that each life has value, those workers made miracle after miracle, signs that the wine of our compassion wasn't all gone after all.

John today introduces us to the first of seven recorded "signs" in his gospel, what we might call miracles, though it hardly seems as fantastic as the rescue of Elisabeth. Jesus seems to think so too. You can almost hear Jesus agreeing with us in the opening passages of today's text: Mother, it's not my time. This is just a wedding. This is not important. This is only about making a time more joyful, not about transforming tragedy into joy. It's not my time, not *yet*, Mother.

But she almost seems to ignore him, or rather to invite him. "Do as he tells you...." He responds to her invitation and a host is lifted up in the hearts and minds of his guests, who have no idea there has been a miracle. They only experience hospitality they didn't expect, leading them to believe that their host — the one who invited them to this feast — cares for them more than they realized.

Most modern scholars suggest that it also tells us what the "Signs" in John are for. It's actually right there at the end of today's passage: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." For John, the miracles, the signs are evidence that God is working in and through Jesus, that he is the anointed one. And it doesn't matter that it's not a big, showy, bring-someone-back-from-the-dead miracle, because this isn't about showing that Jesus is powerful. But instead, that Jesus is an instrument of God, worthy of trust,

worthy of belief in what he is saying. For this reason, it's okay that it's an everyday miracle, for everyday miracles are signs of God at work, are signs that the wine may yet flow freely again in every situation where we start to doubt it.

Just ask Jessica Bell. She's an attorney here in Chicago who volunteers with organizations that help provide dignity to homeless and indigent women in Chicagoland. This week, Jessica, like many of us, was in a funk over the seeming wine-less-ness of the world when she got on the Redline for her regular commute home late on Friday night.

Here's how she describes what happened: "There's a homeless man sitting across from me. He's older, weathered, minding his own business. His feet are so swollen he's wearing the tattered gym shoes he has with the back folded down; like slip-ons. I don't know how many pairs of socks he's wearing in an attempt to keep his feet warm but there is blood seeping through.

"There's another man on the other side [near] the doors; younger, carrying a satchel and a suitcase, also minding his own business. He's wearing a pair of big black snow boots. They look new; they look expensive; they're built for a Chicago winter. Quietly, in a blink and you'll miss it fashion, the younger man takes off the boots he's wearing and passes them to the old man. He opens his suitcase and gives him a pair of socks as well.

"The young man puts on a spare pair of shoes from the suitcase. These shoes are nice too, but not as nice as the boots. They would have fit the old man just as well, but they were not what this old man needed. He tells the old man to try and clean his feet and to make sure he changes into the new socks as soon as he can and then the young man gets off at 87th."¹

Jessica discovered the young man's name, but publicly identifies him only as Paul in the photos of the exchange she posted on Facebook. And the wine flowed freely on the Redline Friday night.

This weekend we seek to honor the memory and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was awarded the Nobel peace Prize the year I was born. At his Nobel lecture that December, Dr. King referenced the famous quote by Victor Hugo: "All the forces in the world are not so powerful as an idea whose time has come." An idea whose time has come — hospitality, bringing joy and creating community.

Mary knew that when she cajoled her son into an act of hospitality and selflessness that restored joy and helped strengthen the bonds of community and celebration. Paul knew that when he offered his shoes and socks to a man he would never see again. Dr. King knew that when he literally gave his life for the idea that racial and

¹ Retrieved from Facebook post of Jessica Bell on January 12 at 10:33 p.m.

economic justice were the only positive way forward for our nation and indeed the world.

So, yes, there are those whose lack of thoughtfulness or lack of compassion leaves us at times thinking that, by all appearances, the wine has run out. But never let us despair, for God is at work now, just as when Christ was among us, proving through acts of compassion, hospitality and community that it still flows freely.

My time has not yet come, Jesus suggests and his mother proves him wrong, for it is always time for compassion. It is always time to be an agent of joy. Perhaps the idea whose time has come for our time is defiant hospitality.

Did you notice what Jesus used to make the wine? They were the jars that were set aside for one purpose — to hold the waters used for purification baths, the ritual actions of the Hebrew people to ritually cleanse themselves after some particular activity that was seen as unseemly or sinful. Jesus has them fill those jars with water and then wine pours out of them.

Today we ordain and install new deacons and ruling elders for service to this community and to God. These vessels, whom God has chosen to lead, to govern, to provide ministries of care, will pour out themselves over the next three years in service to Christ and his church, in service to the world. And we pray today with confidence that joy and compassion and community will be lifted up through their service and self-sacrifice.

But they cannot and must not do it alone. And so perhaps our challenge today is not to be the guests who despair that the wine has run out, but to be one of those stewards in today's story, filling the jars of our own lives with the simple, everyday gifts we have — our compassion, our acts of kindness, our hospitality, our honoring of the value of every child of God, our giving of our time and compassion and, yes, even our financial resources — hopeful or perhaps even confident that God can and will make of them the best, most flavorful, most loving wine of human friendship and joy.

It is an idea whose time has come. May we be the wine of compassion now and all our days.

Amen.