

New Wine

Whitefish UMC

January 17, 2010

John 2:1-11; Isaiah 62:1-5

- † If you're an avid reader, as I am, one of the best things about Christmas is getting books from people who know what you like. One of the best things about the time after Christmas is having space in your life to read the good books you received.
- † This year our son bought Tom and me books, among other great gifts. Mine was carefully chosen from a list of best books in the magazine *Christian Century*. It's called Be Not Anxious: pastoral care of disquieted souls, by Allan Hugh Cole, Jr., and it has already come in handy.
- † Tom's book, on the surface, is more light-hearted. It's Garrison Keillor's Life Among the Lutherans, which is a compilation of Lake Wobegon monologues that focus on church life. Although it's geared toward the particularities of Lutherans, a lot of it applies to Methodists (and really to the human condition among those who claim adherence to Christianity and a middle class, smaller town, lifestyle).
- † One of Tom's gifts to me is reading aloud before we go to sleep at the end of the day. He's been reading these vignettes from the book, which are amusing and mostly spot-on when it comes to church folks. It's a gentle way to drift into sleep.

† But the other night, reading the last of the pieces in the book, the message was anything but pleasant. It starts out innocently enough:

A former Wobegonian wrote “Ninety-five Theses,” a neatly typed manifesto he brought home in late October 1980, along with a fine woman from Boston whom his parents wanted to meet, since he had married her a few weeks before. His parents live in a little white house on the corner of Branch and Taft, where his old bedroom under the eaves has been lovingly preserved.

† But then the narrative became edgy and bitter:

He left his wife to look at it and snuck away to the Lutheran church, intending to nail the “Ninety-five” to the door, a dramatic complaint against his upbringing, but then something in his upbringing made him afraid to pound holes in a good piece of wood, and he heard the Luther Leaguers (like our MYF) inside at their Halloween pizza party and was afraid he would be seen....

† Apparently the former Wobegonian had suffered mightily in his short life, and he blamed it all on his parents, the small-town culture of the upper Midwest, and the Lutheran church. The first few of the “Ninety-five” start out with harmless complaints like having to eat lutefisk during Advent and being fed fatty foods, but then the complaints become serious and biting:

4. You have taught me to worship a god who is like you, who shares your thinking exactly, who is going to slap me one if I don't straighten out fast. I am very uneasy every Sunday, which is cloudy and deathly still and filled with silent accusing whispers.

5. You have taught me to feel shame and disgust about my own body, so that I am afraid to clear my throat or blow my nose. Even now I run

water in the sink when I go to the bathroom. "Go to the bathroom" is a term you taught me to use.

6. You have taught me the fear of becoming lost, which has killed the pleasure of curiosity and discovery. In strange cities, I memorize streets and always know exactly where I am. Amid scenes of great splendor, I review the route back to the hotel.

7. You have taught me to fear strangers and their illicit designs, robbing me of easy companionship, making me a very suspicious friend. Even among those I know well, I continue to worry: what do they *really* mean by liking me?

8. You have taught me to value a good night's sleep over all else including adventures of love and friendship, and even when the night is charged with magic, to be sure to get to bed. If God had not meant everyone to be in bed by ten-thirty, He would never have provided the ten o'clock newscast.

9. You taught me to be nice, so that now I am so full of niceness, I have no sense of right and wrong, no outrage, no passion. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," you said, so I am very quiet, which most people think is politeness. I call it repression.

† Now here is where I have a confession to make: I fell asleep at this point in the narrative—I think I did it in self-defense. I didn't want to hear such sourness anymore and needed to escape from it.

- † Tom and I talked about it later, and I started thinking about the remaining complaints of the young man about his upbringing in relation to today's scripture passages, both from Isaiah and John's gospel.
- † There are a couple of parallels, at least. First, in the Gospel of John, Jesus, a young man at the beginning of his ministry, is with his mother Mary at a wedding. They exchange words, and these words have an edge to them. One of the reasons we love this story of the wedding at Cana is that the conversation between Jesus and his mother sounds real, not idealized. Mothers and their sons get "cinchy" with each other.
- † And Mary's words have a ring of familiarity. One writer says, "I hear a question in Mary's voice as she points out to her son Jesus that the wedding guests have run out of wine. I hear a question that I carry deep within myself, a question familiar to many of us: 'Will I have enough? Are we running out?'"
- † Are we rich enough, safe enough, good enough? Will we go over the budget? Can we put dinner on the table and keep the wolf from the door?' It's a question of scarcity I hear in Mary's voice, and Jesus answers it, as he always does, with abundance."
- † If that's the case, I wonder, how have we twisted the message for so many years, just like the parents and son in Garrison Keillor's "Ninety-five Theses?" How and why have we taken Jesus' life and words and made them into stinginess and caution and fear instead of joy and gratitude?
- † Okay, maybe that's oversimplifying, but isn't there some truth to that question? And what are we meant to do with the misunderstanding and miscommunication of the past—of mistakes made by our parents in our upbringing and by our church and our community and our culture?

- † I ask these questions not just so we can all be better adjusted and less angry about our past, as we wish the young man in the “Ninety-five Theses” could become. I ask them because sometimes this attitude of scarcity affects not only our happiness and well-being, but the world’s as well.
- † By now we’ve all seen enough news reports about the effects of the earthquake in Haiti to know of the devastation and the desperate need for the world to help that poor country and her people rebuild.
- † But even as relief supplies pour in from around the world, some commentators, even people who profess to follow Jesus, have chosen to assign blame for the tragedy to God’s punishment. Some use it as an occasion to insert racial division into our government’s response. It would be ridiculous, except that so many people follow these broken and misguided voices.
- † How can we embody a better way? Not just by donating money, but by doing what theologian Sallie McFague describes as adopting new house rules. Part of those new rules for living together in God’s home, our earth, means having a “wild space.”
- † Being a Christian, McFague says, entails finding the wild space in us. It’s a vision that is countercultural in some ways, because it is based on the radical, generous, abundant love of God and God’s desire for abundant life for all.
- † It’s the vision of John, telling that story about the good wine at the wedding at Cana. And it’s a vision that starts with a recognition of need, of emptiness. As writer Anne Sutherland Howard explains,
- † “It was that wild space in Jesus that allowed him to pose an alternative to the status quo of his day. It was that wild space that allowed him to say that everybody, really everybody, is welcome at the banquet table. It was that

wild space that allowed him to say that the meek are blessed, along with the poor and the mourning.

- † It was that counter-cultural wild space in Jesus that cost him his life and that gives us ours. It was the wild space that Martin Luther King Junior discovered that allowed him to question the status quo and gave him the freedom to pursue the same radical vision of love and justice that led him, like Jesus, to the cross.”
- † It is the wild space in each of us that allows us to question the patterns of our own lives so that we might begin to break free of the conventions, addictions, protections, and consumptions that have wounded us and left us with a sense of stinginess, bitterness, and regret.
- † Maybe we don’t match up with the conventional models of success, and maybe it’s obvious or not. Maybe we are struggling with the death of a loved one, a lost job, addiction or depression, a vague disappointment about not “making it.” Perhaps we blame our parents, our culture, our past.
- † How can we begin to hear the words of the prophet Isaiah because they are meant for us: “You shall be called My Delight is in Her...for the Lord delights in you.” And how can we return the favor?
- † As Madeleine L’Engle says in A Stone for a Pillow, “We are not meant to cringe before God. We are to enjoy all the delights the Lord has given to us, sunsets and sunrises, and a baby’s first laugh, and friendship and love, and the brilliance of the stars.”
- † Jesus reminds us that through him, there is more than enough new and wonderful wine for everyone, for the world and for us. If he can transform ordinary water into wine bubbling over with the joy of living, can he not transform us?

- † The Bible is full of the joy of God in all of creation. It's not superficial, a denial of tragedy, a Pollyannaish optimism that everything is just fine—anything but. Rather joy in the Bible comes in the midst of difficult and trying and sometimes tragic circumstances: exile, loneliness, persecution, suffering, death even.
- † But in all of it, God's people continue to be joyful. Not because their circumstances or upbringing are wonderful, but because of the promise that regardless of the circumstance, God will not let go, will not abandon, but will be with God's people—wherever they are, whatever is happening to them.
- † Think of the music and poetry of the civil rights movement, whose leader we celebrate this weekend. Despite horrible suffering and tragedy as the bonds of slavery and oppression were loosened, hear the words of joy and promise in so much of those artistic expressions. I especially love the words of James Weldon Johnson in what is called the African American national anthem:
- † “Lift Every Voice and Sing—till earth and heaven sing, ring with the harmony of liberty. Let our rejoicing rise—high as the listening skies. Let it resound as the rolling sea.”
- † Despite all the tragedy around us and the wounds of our past, the news is good. Jesus came to a wedding, Jesus provided wine to keep the celebration going. And he will keep on providing it out of God's abundance for each of us.
- † Contrary to what you may have been taught by your parents, your culture, your church, your inner voices, God delights in you. And God delights in our brothers and sisters around the world, too. Won't you be some of that

new and best wine for the healing of the world, even as your life is made new?

† Amen.

Sources:

Garrison Keillor, Life Among the Lutherans. 2009.

John Buchanan, “The Delight of God,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Anne Sutherland Howard, “Finding Wild Space,” <http://day1.org>