

The Good Wine of Steadfast Love

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Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
January 16, 2022

John 2's story of the wedding at Cana provides us with a lot of food for thought and for our souls. There is the back-and-forth between Jesus and his mother, when she tells him, "They have no wine," which presumably he would have already known about. It sounds like she told him this as a way of suggesting to him that he should do something about it. He replies somewhat archly, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Mother Mary, however, retains confidence in her first-born, and says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." You can just imagine all of the relational moves that are taking place.

Then, whether he simply gave in to his mother's pressure, or whether he was acting of his own volition, or both, Jesus instructs the servants to put ordinary water into the stone jars – set aside, the text tells us, for the rites of purification – purification rituals which would delineate those who were clean from those who were unclean, and thus mark off those permitted inside from those who needed to stay outside. And when the chief steward – who may well have been feeling some considerable pressure and stress from the social faux-pas of running out of wine at a wedding – when he draws out the contents of the stone jars, he realizes that he is tasting, not ordinary water, but very good wine. Jesus has taken the ordinary water of distinguishing one group of people from another, and has turned it into good wine to be enjoyed by all.

Psalm 36, the first text that Connie read for us, is a prayer designed as a sandwich, a "chiasm" to use the formal term. The bread of the sandwich, the first and the last parts of the psalm – which were outside the section that Connie read for us – describe the "wicked," those who are enemies of the psalmist and are assumed to be enemies of God. "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts, they plot mischief while on their beds; they are set on a way that is not good; they do not reject evil" is how the psalm begins. At the end of the psalm, we read again about these wicked ones who experience the consequences of their actions: "There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise." The psalm is framed and surrounded, at the beginning and at the end, by the wicked and those who do evil. Psalm 36 is very aware of the realities of opposition and malice in our world. Biblical faith is not naïve.

But the meat of the psalm, the heart of the prayer, is not dictated by the malice of the world. The heart of the psalm, verses 5-10 which Connie did read, center down on God's *steadfast love*. "Your *steadfast love*, O Lord, extends to the heavens." "How precious is your *steadfast love*, O God!" "O continue your *steadfast love* to those who

know you." 3 times, in the space of 6 verses, the psalmist sings about God's steadfast love.

Steadfast love, the New Revised Standard Version's rendering of the radiant Hebrew word *hesed* – which is one of the Hebrew words that most of us pastors have held onto after seminary, is one of the core characteristics of the God of the Bible, in the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament is where we are given the God of *hesed*, of tenacious solidarity, of committed covenantal love that expresses the full repertoire of emotions - from anger to grief to tender delight – who refuses to permanently cut God's self off from God's people, just as the apostle Paul declares in Romans 8, that "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." If Paul had written Romans 8 in Hebrew, he would have used the word *hesed*.

The psalmist is surrounded by what we might call the "ordinary water" of the world's arrogance and wickedness and deceit and inequity – the beginning and the end of the psalm are filled with these words. But in prayer, the psalmist experiences the transfiguration of those into the "good wine" of the steadfast love of God. In spite of being surrounded by so much enmity, the psalmist prays to God, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." Only through prayer and faith can ordinary water be transformed into good wine, or enmity and cruelty be turned to light and steadfast love.

That transformation is exactly what we are given in the life of Jesus, and it is what we were given in that follower of Jesus, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Like the psalmist, Dr. King was surrounded by those who sought to do him harm; they threatened him and his family, they jailed him, they scorned him. And yet he responded with the power of nonviolent, redemptive love. As I have been thinking about Dr. King this week, I have realized that Dr. King's life – like the life of Jesus before him – challenges all of us, no matter where we fall on any political spectrum. Dr. King's life and witness cannot be reduced to issues of race and racism, for he took his stand with the poor of society, naming the realities of violence and structural economic injustice that keep so many people in poverty. When he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, he was in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a strike of sanitation workers in that city. In March 1968, he told sanitation workers in that city, "You are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages ... working on a full-time basis... getting part-time income."¹

But racism and structural racial injustice *were* fundamental to his critique of society. Dr. King was a student of American history and spoke to the ways that racial

¹ Michael K. Honey, "What Happened to Martin Luther King Jr's Dream of Economic Justice?" *Time*, February 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5783976/martin-luther-king-jr-economic-justice/>.

inequalities fostered different experiences in our country, depending on the color of your skin. As we face the challenges of mass incarceration and the differences in generational wealth in our country and other issues, we still see the effects of racial inequality.

Like the psalmist, Dr. King was confronted by those who opposed him and what he believed. And like the psalmist, Dr. King turned that ordinary water of opposition into the good wine of steadfast, redemptive love. Surrounded by so many challenges, Dr. King refused to turn to violence and hatred. He leaned into his faith, he leaned *hard* into his faith, keeping his heart open to the humanity of those who opposed him. The novelist Alice Walker has written that the most pressing and necessary lesson of any spiritual teaching is to keep opening wider your own heart.

Where in your life do you find yourself hardening into resentment? Where do you find yourself seeing the world in binary, oppositional categories of good and bad, us and them, seeing those who are different from you as enemies who must be eliminated? There can be a profound pressure to operate according to the rules of our polarized culture. And those rules are encouraging people to fight to the death.

What would it look like for you to encounter the ordinary water of human resentment and animosity – and my goodness, are they ordinary and normal – what would it look like for you to encounter them, wherever you find them, with the good wine of steadfast love, even if that is not reciprocated by the other party? In the end, steadfast love is ultimately not a strategic tactic to get what you want. Dr. King's life was violently taken from us, at the age of 39. It is a posture of trust in God's patient and redemptive mercy that redeems and heals all of our losses and failures.

Keeping our hearts open to the Other – to the one who is different from us, the one who disagrees with us, the one who is opposed to us – is risky business. It's risky business because open hearts get hurt. Some people will try to take advantage of those who keep their hearts open in steadfast love. They did it to Jesus, it was done to Dr. King, it could be done to you. And that's not the only hurt that can come to those who try to live open-heartedly. As we open our hearts to the Other, we may become aware of various ways that *we* have acted – intentionally or unintentionally – and participated in discriminatory ways that have hurt others. That kind of awareness and self-knowledge does not feel good, and we may get defensive and try and protect ourselves from it. Becoming hard-hearted is one way to protect yourself from this kind of self-knowledge. But being open-hearted towards the Other involves a willingness to learn these things.

The good wine of steadfast love is available to us in every moment, as we walk together into the Beloved Community. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.