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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
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Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11  
“Wine of the Shrine”

The scripture texts today are from the lectionary. I'll read the gospel passage in my sermon. Isaiah provides a way to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow.

At first glance the Isaiah reading is difficult to understand. Simply, it's an expression of gratitude by recently returned exiles for the land of Palestine and the city of Jerusalem.

Using a marriage analogy Isaiah states in verse 7: “For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

The marriage theme connects with the gospel story which takes place at a wedding. Before I go there, I was impressed with the statement of the builder's intimate and appreciative relationship with what he or she builds. It reminds me that Martin Luther King Jr. said:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

Ideally, this is how each of us should go about our work. Work in the Christian Reformed context is vocation. We heard about spirit in the workplace from Dan Phipps in his Saturday breakfast talk yesterday.

Commentaries on the Isaiah text say that there was a new openness of the Israelites to their gentile neighbors. They sought relationships with them and even invited them into the temple. This again foreshadows MLK who had a high regard for the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. He was a prophet himself.

He said: “Men (and women) often hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they cannot communicate; they cannot communicate because they are separated.” He wanted people of all races and creeds to come together to build God's world of peace and justice.

We now move on to the gospel text and here again King is instructive. He said: “Every person lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external.”

The gospel writer of the Wedding at Cana story had the same concern. Especially in the Gospel according to John, Jesus speaks on two levels. What he says materially always has a spiritual side to it. When he says "I am the bread of life" we see bread but think of spiritual nourishment which includes real bread and spiritual bread.

The story today is fascinating. It begins: "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding." A local was getting married and Jesus, his mother and disciples were invited. We arrive in the middle of the party.

The text proceeds: "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'" This sounds pretty rough but commentators say that it merely refers to Jesus' refusal to do what his mother wants. Children, especially adult children, don't change. They have minds of their own as it should be. The "hour" refers to Jesus's death and resurrection which happened as a result of his Messianic identity. Jesus is reluctant to reveal that part of himself to the wedding guests. He wants his ministry to unfold more slowly.

Mother's know best, as seen in the next sentence. The text reads: "His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'"

Now comes the body of the story. Jesus changes his mind. "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'"

Party hearty in Palestine! We are led to believe that the guests are drunk. In this raucous atmosphere Jesus produces more wine and it's the best. His only real reason on the face of it is saving the host from embarrassment. But this is a spiritual story indicated by the fact that the jars were used for the Jewish rites of purification. Jesus wants them filled with water.

The jars represent the old religion and water symbolizes cleansing. Jesus is beginning his ministry and he wants to show that something new is happening. The old religion needs purification. That's probably why he changed his mind and decided to go ahead with the miracle. That's how John sees it.

Back then, wine symbolized restoration and renewal. It is a rich symbol inferring prosperity, abundance and good times. Changing the pots of water into pots flowing over with good wine becomes a metaphor for Jesus' ministry as he brings vitality to the ancient religion.

And in doing so he reveals his true self to his disciples. The final sentence of the text states: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples

believed in him.” John, the writer of the gospel, had a very high view of Jesus. He would never have told this amazing story of Jesus if he had not believed that God was revealed in him in a very special way. The disciples believed in him.

The story would have us believe that Jesus is still changing water into wine in our lives, our churches and our communities. As Jesus is revealed to his disciples he is revealed to us. We are encouraged to believe in him as well; especially his power to change what is old and dry in us, church and society, into something vital and refreshing. In this way the wine at the wedding is “wine of the shrine.”

In my early journalism days I wrote a book on surfing for Macmillan Publishers called *Hitting the Lip*. The title of the book refers to an exciting surfing maneuver exercised back then. One dropped to the bottom of a wave and powered up to the crest or lip of the wave and hit into or through it. The momentum of surging white water thrust one back into the wave in thrilling fashion.

I have never been a poet but I ended the book with a poem I wrote called “Surfing. This is not great poetry but here goes:

A rebirth in time  
In the womb of the earth  
Through splashing consistency  
In waves of persistency

A pattern in rhyme –  
Turning, tucking and driving  
Through tunnels sparkly  
Releasing so lively

It's the wine of the shrine  
The fresh, fertile surf  
Rumbling, bubbling, so exciting  
Staring at us with eyes inviting

I often wondered why I used the phrase “wine of the shrine.” For me and for John in the text and for Jesus I believe it connotes spiritual essence in the midst any material context as Martin Luther King Jr. would say. I like to think I knew what I was saying back then in my surfing days. John and Jesus certainly knew what they were saying and Jesus remains alive and new and fresh for us today.

I pray that our jars brim over with the wine of renewal and growth. When Suellen and I toast with a glass of wine at home Suellen often says, “Health, hope, happiness and prosperity” and I say, “Cheers!” Here's to you all: “Health, hope, happiness and prosperity; and cheers” to you and to Redwoods Presbyterian Church. Amen.