

John 2:1-11 Isaiah 62:1-5 January 17, 2016 “The Best is Yet to Come”

This morning we consider transformation, which is what happens when something is changed, made new or different. Water into wine, or a struggling church into a growing one. Sometimes an experience changes us personally - our attitudes, our perspectives. Sometimes situations are transformed: what seemed impossible for some reason opens up and becomes manageable or even exciting.

It's easy to settle for no transformation, to prefer “things as they are.” Having grown up in the South, I have tended to criticize that area for being too unwilling to get over racism. But today, as we are about to have our annual observance to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I guess there is no denying that racism is alive and persistent throughout our nation and our world. News reports have forced us to see how entrenched some folks still are, as they try desperately to pump themselves up by putting someone else down. Fear of those “different” has proved itself to be powerful this past year as racism, homophobia and fear of foreigners continue to influence our politics and our actions. Transformation has not happened for too many.

But it has in some. People do change their minds and their hearts. I always chuckle when I remember how, a year after I had arrived at the United Church in Westville in New Haven as pastor, some of the members admitted to me how terrified they had been when told that they were being sent a female pastor. Thirty-plus years later, more than one of you here in Winsted confessed to me that when you heard that another woman pastor was coming, you were ready to change churches.

There must be a point of transformation, where one human being sees the other in a different light, aware of both gifts and faults. This is true when we're talking racial or sexual barriers, this is true when we're talking nationalities, this is true when there are social or economic differences, and this is even true when we're talking about people in church sitting next to each other in the pews. Our prejudices and biases and fears need to be changed, transformed.

The best way to be transformed is through tending to our relationship with God. This will give us strength and perspective to look at others and life differently. The Bible would have us see that one who responds to God will be transformed, made different.

The people of Israel had forgotten God, trusting in foreign powers and the religious practices of their non-Jewish neighbors instead, and then had been punished by God as the powerful superpower of the day, the Babylonians, overran them and sent many into exile. Devastated, the people felt abandoned and let down by God. Through the prophet Isaiah, God proclaimed to the disheartened people that God would change everything for them. They were considered forsaken, weak laughingstocks of the world.... But God gave them God's promise: “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. 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.” (Isaiah 62:4-

5) God gave them a new image of their identity and promised them that something GOOD was going to happen, that in God they had a new name and a new future.

The Gospel of John has given us today's story of Jesus transforming water into the best of wine. John sets it just as Jesus was starting his public ministry. John wanted to make it clear that Jesus changes things! He makes a difference! And John wants us to notice that Jesus started out by making a difference, *not* in important Jerusalem or with high priests or powerful politicians, but in an obscure little town called Cana at the wedding of a not-very-wealthy couple. John wanted us to understand that Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, makes a difference in the *ordinary* stuff of life. His presence makes things different!

Most of what John's Gospel tells us about Jesus deals with signs, signs pointing to something beyond whatever the sign is. It has been suggested that this wedding story points to the inadequacy of the Jewish religion. The people of Israel had repeatedly failed to trust God, and the religious leaders had so tried to dictate their own understandings of God's work that the result had become **watered down**, sort of like a watery, flat Coke. There was little joy and little real honor given to God. In this way of thinking, Jesus came to provide new wine just where things seemed to be running dry. He brought the new wine, the best saved for last, which was a total reversal of the way things were usually done at wedding parties or in life. If you hear nothing else today, hear this: with Jesus Christ, the best is yet to come.

The changing of the water into wine is a wonderful story. I have always wondered how Baptists and other Christians (even some Methodists) can preach total abstinence from alcohol after reading this story. Growing up, I often heard my fellow Episcopal church members joke that the Baptists got it mixed up: that they thought that Jesus turned wine into water.

But what does God want us to get from this story today? The late Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, who was for years Chaplain of Harvard Chapel, offered a clear perspective. Listen to his words: "(Gospel-writer) John makes it simple and clear, and wants us to understand that Jesus has come into the world to make a difference... Pay attention to Jesus, says John, and you will see God alive and at work in the world, and in the most ordinary of circumstances... Jesus reveals himself in the mundane, almost laughable needs of ordinary people, peasants who in the midst of their pleasures suddenly find themselves deprived. He supplies their needs. God supplies *our* needs.

"Something else to know is this: the best is yet to come. .... How I wince when I hear people say to College seniors every Commencement time that these (college years) were the 'best years of your life.' What a crock! What a tragedy if this is so!... Thank God, there are *not* the best years of your life (no matter what stage you are in in your life)....It is the essential conviction of Christianity, and the heart of our Christian faith that the best is yet to be and that even old age or death cannot get in the way of the abundance only God can provide. God's time is the time we have not yet experienced, but because it is God's we know now that it is good. ...." (Peter Gomes, *More Sundays at Harvard*, pp. 74-75)

I want to share the old and beloved story of the woman who asked her pastor to make sure that a fork was placed in her casket when she died. I do not know who first wrote this story, but it has been passed around very meaningfully on the Internet and surely used in many sermons.

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and been given an estimated three months to live. As she was getting her things "in order", she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested that she be buried with her favorite Bible.

Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly. "What's that?" the pastor asked. "This is very important," the woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That surprises you, does it?" the woman asked. "Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," the pastor said. The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Be sure to keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie or lemon meringue pie. Something wonderful! So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and want them to wonder "What's with the fork?" Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork...the best is yet to come". (original source unknown)

We tend to go through life afraid of things falling apart, of the "wine running out." The Gospel would have us know that in Jesus Christ it will never run out, but only increase and get better as we ask him to lead us and to shine through our lives for others, all the way through and beyond death. Wherever we are feeling that our "life supply" is close to empty, there can be transformation as we dare to ask Jesus to fill us with life and to show us the way.

Writer Frederick Beuchner, in talking about Jesus' story of The Good Samaritan (the "bad guy" who ended up being good because he helped somebody who hated him), offers insight into the whole call to follow Jesus: "...For us to be really alive, not just half alive, we need to help and heal the man: his need for mercy is matched by our need to be merciful. It is not just for his sake that we come to his rescue. It is also for our sakes. Neither of us can be really human, really alive, without the other; and every time we pass him by and leave him to his own misery, we both suffer for it. We need each other..." (*The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 142) We need to be merciful as much as we need mercy.

Jesus Christ can free us so that we are able to see how much we need to give of ourselves for the sake of others. This gives abundance usin life, and the "wine" won't run out!

Peter Gomes closed his sermon to the Harvard community with these words: "So thank God for that nameless bride and groom at Cana, for it is there that you and I discover that we have a

future, and that it is better than the past because Jesus is there.” (*More Sundays At Harvard*, p. 75)

A prayer: The days are short, the night is cold, the tests are real, our courage fails: strengthen us, O light of our dark sky, that we may see and rejoice in the shape of things to come. (Adapted from a prayer by Peter Gomes, *More Sundays At Harvard*, p. 75).

May it be so. Amen!