
Drunk and Distracted

John 2:1-11

A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on January 17, 2016

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The Gospel of John, also known as the fourth gospel, is different in content and character from the other three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptics. This is a result of their common and corresponding composition. The synoptics have a common theme; Jesus teaches a social vision based on the Kingdom of God. The synoptics have a consistent narrative; Jesus teaches with pithy phrases and powerful parables. And Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a core timeline: in the course of a year, Jesus progresses from a healer and teacher in Galilee to an enemy of the imperial state in Jerusalem.

The gospel of John, however, paints quite a different picture of Christ. In John, Jesus doesn't just teach about the kingdom of God. John's Jesus is aware that **he is God**. Rather than hearing him say, "The kingdom of God is like this, that or the other..." John's Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the resurrection. And I am the way, the truth and the life."

The Jesus of John is more miraculous. He is more cosmic. He is more mystical and more magical than anything we see in the synoptic gospels. In fact the writer of John even locates Jesus's life in the beginning of creation. This is why the book begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the word was made flesh, and came down and dwelt among us full of grace and truth."

So whether it has to do with John being the latest of the four gospels produced and thus furthest removed from Jesus's actual life; or whether it is because this is the most Hellenized gospel, and thus influenced by Greek, neo-Platonic philosophy, the end result is undeniable—

John provided us with images of Jesus that stresses the supernatural, emphasizes the unbelievable, and accentuates abstract ideals regarding Jesus's identity.

Take today's gospel lesson as an example. We witness Jesus at a wedding in the peasant village of Cana. Most of you know the story. The wine runs out, and Jesus intervenes. Jesus turns empty vats into a mobile vineyard. Jesus transforms H₂O into Pinot. Water becomes wine.

Scholars believe that the intent of the story was metaphorical as opposed to literal, symbolic not supernatural. It was intended as a story of inspiration. For peasant families, the week-long celebration of a wedding provided an important social counterpunch to their typical pattern of life. Weddings had the capacity to disrupt the slow, crushing weight of quotidian poverty. Wedding celebrations mollified the simmering misery of the mundane aspects of being a peasant in Palestine. Thus the writer of John used this miracle to convey one clear message about Jesus—Jesus is both the living water and the wine of life that never runs dry! In Jesus we can find exactly what we need and a lot of what we want to make it through life's journey.

This should be good news for someone here today. There is someone here this morning whose spiritual and emotional vats are running low. There is somebody here who has sought to fill your personal jugs with the water of materialism and the wine of hedonism. Yet you have come to discover that the intoxicating drug of self-indulgence has left you spiritually, morally, and emotionally dehydrated.

Some of us thought money and material could quench our thirst. We landed the job, earned the promotion, purchased the house, the car, and the summer home. But I heard it said somewhere that, "If you take a good look at my face. You will see that my smile looks out of place. If you look closer, it's easy to trace, the tracks of my tears." Why? Because money and material can speak to our physical needs and creature comforts, but we are so much more, and thus need so much more.

We are more than flesh and blood. You and I are more than bones and sinew, nerves and neurons. We are also spiritual creatures with longings, aspirations and yearnings that material cannot meet and all the money of Duke University's endowment can never buy.

You and I are made in the *imago dei*, or the image of God. This means that we were made in love, and made to love. Only love for self, love for others, and the love of others can satisfy this insatiable thirst for a radical love that affirms our distinctiveness—not because of ourselves, but in spite of ourselves.

This is the metaphorical message of this miracle. Jesus is among the peasants. Jesus is among the poor and socially marginal. Therefore, this early Johannine literature reminded its early followers that is among widespread fellowship, friendship, and family interconnectedness—expressed most profoundly in a first century Palestinian wedding—that we will find both living water and the wine of new life.

With this sort of radical love we need not thirst any longer. With radical love we need not stress over limited resources. And with radical love we need not worry whether those who came first or those who come later receive the best “wine” God has to offer. For in God’s kingdom, love, like wine in this story, never runs out but flows freely. Love is like the light of a candle. We need not fear sharing it with others, for the light of love never diminishes when given freely.

Love only expands.

Now I offer this allegorical interpretation of this difficult text in order to expose a danger. In today’s world, you and I face interpretive problems that the ancient communities did not face in their world. Many in our world have defined truth so narrowly that it has impacted how we read and receive story’s such as this. We reduce truth to fact versus fiction. We reduce truth to it happened or it didn’t happen. And we reduce truth to a literalism that obscures more valuable lessons from Jesus’s life and teachings.

For instance, there are some in our society who need this story to be a biographical account of Jesus’s activity. Some need this to be a factual account of Jesus at a wedding. And some need to defend the fact that Jesus actually turned water into wine.

I am one who believes strongly that if you and I become too consumed with whether Jesus turned water into wine, we run the risk of becoming drunk and distracted from what Jesus’s life was all about. Our minds can be messed up by trying to make literal sense of the miraculous. We

become sloshed by the supernatural. And in the process, the life of Jesus can become so cosmic and heavenly directed that his life and teachings do us no earthly good.

For as long as we place more emphasis on the post-Easter Jesus—the risen Messiah known for the miraculous—than we do the pre-Easter Jesus—an anti-imperialist teacher who aligned with the poor and oppressed, challenged state violence, and was thus put to death for treason— then we will miss the many ways that Jesus’s teachings might inform our world.

Here I am reminded of a story recorded by author Taylor Branch about civil rights legend, Reverend Vernon Johns. The iconoclastic Baptist minister was Martin Luther King Jr’s predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, yet, ironically enough, discharged for his civil rights activity that many in the silk-stocking congregation found unseemly. In 1960 white Southern Baptists and black National Baptists gathered at the Seventh Baptist Church in Baltimore to discuss racial tension in the city. During the worship service Vernon Johns sat visibly annoyed as he listened to a sermon about the resurrected Jesus. When it was Johns’ moment to address the assembly, to the consternation of white preachers and the humiliation of most black preachers in attendance, Johns went right after the preacher who went before him. “The thing that disappoints me about the Southern church,” Johns said, “is that it spends all of its time dealing with Jesus after the cross, instead of dealing with Jesus before the cross.”

Johns then turned directly to the preacher and said, “You didn’t do thing but preach about the death of Jesus. If that were the heart of Christianity, all God had to do was to drop him down on Friday and let them kill him, and then yank him up again on Easter Sunday... You don’t hear much about Jesus’s teaching that a man’s religion is revealed in the love of his fellow man... This is what offended the leaders of Jesus’s own established church as well as the colonial authorities from Rome. That’s why they put him on the cross... I want to deal with Jesus before the cross. I don’t give a damn about what happened to him after that.”

I find Reverend John’s critical sentiment here compelling. Not that I agree that we should not care about the Resurrection and how as Christians we continue to encounter a Risen Lord. But what does it mean to take seriously why Jesus ended up on the cross? He was put to death as a bandit, alongside bandits. In our modern interpretation, we have turned the term bandit into

thief, to connote petty criminality. The term bandit in the first century, however, represented religious rebels that revolted against the Roman Empire—Jewish zealots that aligned with the Hebrew prophets rather than the power of Caesar Augustus. So-called zealots that believed that it was their moral obligation to resist forces of oppression that ensnare the most vulnerable, exploit the poor, and build their kingdoms on the backs of the socially and economically oppressed. Whether against Egypt, Babylon, or Rome, Jesus stood within a rich tradition of Jewish resistance that stood on the side of the least of these.

Similarly, in this weekend that our nation commemorates the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us not become drunk and distracted by supernatural narratives about King the “Colorblind Dreamer.” And let us not become inebriated by sanitized accounts about King martyrdom that are disconnected from King’s message.

We are living in a dangerous time defined by fear, calamity, and catastrophe. Xenophobia is running rampant through our nation. The specter of violent threats, real and perceived, have many of us fearful of anyone who does not look like us, think like us, believe like us, or love like us.

Fear and anxiety are also the result of America’s financial calamity of extreme economic inequality and growing caste system. Our current financial calamity adds a heavier burden to the already disadvantaged and downtrodden in this country.

And we are enduring political catastrophe insofar as American empire fueled by economic oligarchs only exacerbate the interconnected dimensions of militarism, classism, racism, sexism, and environmental degradation on a global scale.

These were the realities King ardently opposed. These were the social trends that King lost his life in order to sound the moral alarm. And these were the tragic dimensions of the nation that Martin Luther King, Jr. was deeply in love with, but was just as deeply disappointed by.

I have come by here this morning to remind and encourage all of us not to become drunk and distracted by the wrong part of the story. Jesus did more than turn water to wine. He showed us how to side with those who thirst. Jesus did more than die on a cross. He was put to death for

daring to declare that peasant Jewish Palestinian lives mattered just as much as the sons and daughters of Caesar.

In the same way, the King holiday should beckon us to do more than take a day off. And it should call all of us to account concerning the small and large ways we participate in social injustice. Are we a nation that puts more faith in drones than justice? Are we a nation that puts more faith in prisons than the reforming capacity of people? Are we a nation that excludes rather than aligns with the oppressed, and wears apathy rather than empathy as a badge of political pride? If so, let's just pop open the bubbly, get drunk and fiddle while the Empire burns.

Yet I have the audacity to believe and temerity to hope that as a nation we will appeal to our better angels. I have the gall to pray and boldness to declare that God can deliver us misery, calamity and catastrophe. And we must have the impertinence to dream and faith to act with others who are encouraged by a living Savior who will never let our spiritual vats run dry.

Might we grow weary? Yes. Might we feel frustrated and defeated at times? Absolutely. But this is when, like Martin Luther King, Jr., we can remind recall the words of Julia Ward

Howe:

In the beauty of the lilies
Christ was born across the sea
With a glory in his bosom
that transfigures you and me
As he died to make men holy
let us live to make men free.
God's truth is marching on.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah.
God's truth is marching on.