

“Wine”

Sermon from John 2:1-10

Given Sunday, April 3, 2022

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Three days later, there was a wedding at Cana and Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there. Jesus and his disciples had likewise been invited to the celebration. At a certain point, the wine ran out, and Jesus's mother told him, “They have no wine.” Jesus replied, “Mother, what does that have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” She instructed those waiting on tables, “Do whatever he tells you.”

As prescribed for Jewish ceremonial washing, there were six stone water jars on hand, each one holding between 15 and 25 gallons. “Fill those jars with water,” Jesus said, and the servers filled them to the brim. “Now,” said Jesus, “draw some out and take it to the caterer.” They did as they were instructed. The caterer tasted the water – which had been turned into wine – without knowing where it had come from; the only ones who knew were those who were waiting on tables, since they had drawn the water.

The caterer called the bride and groom over and remarked, “People usually serve the best wine first; then, when the guests have been drinking a while, a lesser vintage is served. What you've done is to keep the best wine until now!”

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The people who know the most are the people closest to the work. But the people closest to the work are sometimes invisible to, or ignored by, the people farther away, the people

who come, and assume all the work has been done for them, and before them, and sort of forget about the workers in the process. But the people who know the most are the people closest to the work.

Sometimes people talk about this in terms of intellectual closeness. Like, I'm not a scientist, so it doesn't do much good to the world for me to argue with scientists on the internet. No one gains from that. Let the people who have done the work explain it, and advocate for it; let them be the promoters and the defenders of the work.

But this morning, with this story, I want us to think about a different kind of closeness to work. I want us to think about physical closeness.

The Baltimore Museum of Art opened an exhibit this week that will run through the middle of July. It's an exhibit unlike any other, in that all of the pieces that make it up were already in the museum before this. They've just been brought together - works from different genres, different eras, different cultures, different mediums - they've been brought together by a collection of guest curators. The exhibit is called "Guarding the Art" and these guest curators - there are 17 of them - they were invited to select the pieces, to serve as advisors for the layout of the exhibit, to work with the marketing department on develop promotional materials, to work with the education department to create the language for those wall cards that

tell more about the pieces; they've been involved in every step of the creation of this show.

The seventeen guest curators - like the art itself - were also already at the museum. They are employed there as security guards. These seventeen are those who answered yes to the invitation that came to their whole team from a museum trustee and its chief curator asking if they'd be interested in being part of this project.

It makes such sense, right? These are the people closest to the work. They spend their days looking at the art. And looking at the people who are looking at the art. They know this art - the pieces themselves and the reactions they evoke in museum visitors - they know that better than anyone. It's their job to watch that.

Elise Tensley is one of the guards who chose to participate as a curator. She's also an artist herself. She selected an abstract painting by Jane Frank called "Winter's End." She says she selected it because Frank has Baltimore ties; because, she says, it's magnificently large; because it's a landscape, but it's abstract, so it has a lot of natural tones and there are also beautiful pops of color, blues and oranges, that she said could make a viewer imagine it as a beach scene, or as purely an emotional work; she says it doesn't have to be limited to any one interpretation. She says she chose it because though it's been in the collection for sixty years, it's only been on display twice in all that time, and both before she was born in 1983.

Who else would notice that?

In a video the museum made to promote the exhibit, she said her advice to any viewer is to wait to read the information on a piece, wait to read the placard on it, wait to find out what the artist meant when they created it. She said, “My advice for someone who’s looking at a piece of art, particularly if it’s your first time, would be to step back, take a moment with it, silence your mind, see how it makes you feel.”

She doesn’t say this outright, but it seems to me she’s suggesting that to really appreciate the art, museum guests might conduct themselves a little more like museum guards.

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The people who know the most are the people closest to the work.

Our text makes it clear in several mentions that the servers know how this water becomes wine. The wedding guests don’t know. The bride and groom don’t know. The caterer doesn’t know - he even makes a big speech, celebrating - or at least highlight - all that he doesn’t know! “People usually serve the best wine first, not you...!” But the people in the back - the people not invited to enjoy the festivities but charged to ensure that everyone else does - those people know what’s happened.

I worked at a lodge one summer that had a restaurant and a big party came in and it was a kid's birthday and they asked if there was any special birthday treat. And this was kind of a fancy place and they didn't have a lot of kid-friendly birthday treats and the chef was busy and he said, "Just scoop out some ice cream, pour some hot fudge on it, it'll be fine." And so the server did that for each person at the table, and brought out these six cups of vanilla ice cream with a dark drizzle on top. And the parents loved it, but weren't quite sure they recognized the taste and the kids said, "No, this is weird," and a little while later the server realized he had mixed up the hot chocolate sauce with a reduced balsamic. And he just sort of pretended like that was all on purpose.

Servers can know things the rest of us might not, and the servers in our story here are the only ones who know that there's something incredible happening here. They know not because they gathered on a hillside to hear what Jesus had to say, not because they were ailing and came to him in need; they know because they were close, and they were paying attention, and he invited them to be part of the miracle. *They* filled the jars with water. *They* drew out the wine. *They* know the secret. We don't know that it couldn't have happened without them, but we know that it didn't happen without them.

In her poem "sometimes," Mary Oliver includes this brief stanza -

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

That's what must've happened here, right? After their shift, the servers get together and say, "What just happened in there? You saw that, right? Did you taste it? It was water, and then - "

Who else would know, besides the people closest to the work? How would we know, if they didn't tell about it?

I also think it's important that it's wine that we've run out of. Jesus doesn't make a bunch of extra wedding cakes out of crackers here. This isn't a party where the buffet gets devoured so he multiplies loaves and fishes. It is *wine* - the element that we hear of in scripture as early as Noah - the gift of the earth created not long after the earth itself - wine, that we've run out of. Wine, the element the prophets tell us will be flowing in heaven. Wine, the element the poets employ to signify abundance and blessing and well-being. Wine, that itself is attentive, and tells about it.

That's what I've learned from living here - what so many of you know, and teach - is that wine is attentive to its world. In a glass of wine, you can taste a time and a place. A winemaker will pour you a glass and as you sip he will tell you about how wet that summer was, about how you can taste the late storm. Or she'll tell you about the hillside of grapes she lost that summer, because of the wildfires - not because they burned

the vines, but because the fruit from there remembers, and you can taste the smoke in the wine that's made from that year. There are differences in flavor and texture, subtle but real, that tell the story of where a particular bottle came from, and how it came to be.

And of course, the way the story is told, Jesus doesn't make this wine like winemakers in this valley make theirs. There is no process, no time, no tasting at the different stages to see how it's coming along, to tease out what's beginning to emerge, to decide when it's ready. But if we set aside the literal questions and details of this story, I wonder - if wine is about the time and the place it comes from - I wonder if Jesus' miraculous winemaking here is a way of saying "we need more of this time and place."

We get lots of stories of his miracles - over and over again, people come to him in pain, and he heals both literal or spiritual brokenness. But here, at the very beginning of his ministry, he works this first miracle - at the instruction of his mother - *with* a community and *for* a community. There is a crowd and they are celebrating. They are celebrating a union. They are rejoicing in it. And there's a party faux pas that threatens to end the whole thing, to close it on a note of disaster or at least disappointment, and at first Jesus thinks that's not his responsibility, and then... what do you think? What changes his mind?

I wonder if then, he realizes, people don't often get to celebrate like this. People work hard, and they tend to all that needs tending, all around them, and there is much that needs not only tending but repair, and there is much that cannot be repaired and so must be mourned. It was as true then as it is today.

But this moment was not that. This moment, people were celebrating. They were eating and drinking and dancing and loving one another. And Jesus was paying attention. And maybe he was astonished. And he decided it wasn't time for that to end. Not yet.

I wonder if his winemaking was a way of capturing, and extending, the way the people knew God's abundance in that particular time and place, through their togetherness, through their communion. If that's what he noticed, and that awareness was itself transformative, and that shared goodness is what the servers then reached in and poured out.

Friends, what is the work you are close to? What calls for your attention? Where do you spend it? When's the last time you were astonished?

Maybe one way we deepen our connections here, and our own awareness of the abundance of God's gifts, is to think about the work we are closest to, ordinary as it might seem, and to tell about it.