

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. **2** Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.
3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."
4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." **5** His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."
6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. **7** Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. **8** He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. **9** 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 **10** 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." **11** Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

"They have no wine," mother Mary notices. As a homemaker, she is well aware of what it takes to please guests at a wedding. To say that they have no wine is to say that something essential has run out and the lack of it can threaten the vitality of this communal event. In those days, wedding feasts would go on for up to seven days, involving throngs of people. Having no wine at a wedding was a big deal! Weddings and wine are also highly symbolic of the relationship between God and the people in many of the prophetic books of the Bible. The prophets Amos (9:13) and Joel (3:18) use the imagery of an abundance of wine to celebrate the arrival of God's new age.¹ In Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2:1-4:2, unfaithful Israel is portrayed as an unfaithful wife and we witness a kind of family break up.² In the text we heard from Isaiah today, we have imagery of a restoration of the covenant as Israel is now again the beautiful bride of God in whom God delights. A part of me always cringes at the ways in which women are equated with faithlessness and dependence on the grace of a benevolent husband. Be that as it may, it is important that we don't miss the fact that the wedding imagery in John also a statement of how God is renewing the relationship but this time with all of creation through Jesus as the Christ.

It is somewhat humorous that Jesus needs his mother to embrace the moment as an occasion for a public witness. In John's Gospel, Jesus is generally portrayed as being fully in control and aware of his destiny. His destiny will find its "crowning moment" on the cross when the powers that be think they have defeated what Christ stands for but are actually enthroning him as the true king. The whole elaborate story of his passion depicts the high stakes drama of when Christ's "hour has come." It's high stakes all the way, not

¹ Ernest Hess, in D. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Westminster: John Knox, 2009), 265.

² Kathleen. M. O'Connor in D. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Westminster: John Knox, 2009), 243.

small potatoes. When Jesus says, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come (John 2:4),” he initially, somewhat rudely, dismisses the moment as small potatoes.

Carol Lakey Hess speaks of the “scandal of divine reluctance” that requires a woman’s prodding to bring about the kind of divine extravagant generosity God is known for.³ Mary ignores Jesus and simply tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do (John 2:5) to make this a proper feast of joy. Notice what jars Jesus is using to provide wine for this wedding. “Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons” (John 2:6). Such water jars were provided so that guests could ritually cleanse themselves before they could be permitted to the wedding feast. The jars are empty now. In this context, they are highly symbolic of how what should be an organic and dynamic relationship between God and God’s creation has become dry and empty. Instead of the joy and vitality represented by the wine, what was once a vital faith has become focused on ritualistic notions of what and who is clean, who is worthy of inclusion or deserving of exclusion. Faithfulness has been reduced to following purity rules as though one could or should affect one’s relationship with God through such external means.

We could say that during Jesus’ time the people of Israel have circled their wagons around their own little group and practices in response to all the threats they have endured as one super power after another has taken over their land. Though the critique here is focused on Jesus’ own Jewish faith group, the behaviors that are being critiqued are commonly human. We, too, have to ask ourselves: How might our own lives and our communal lives reflect a loss of vitality and abundance? How does a community, a nation, or subgroups within it, not get trapped in circling its proverbial wagons in times of stress or crisis as the first or only line of engagement? Where might we be retreating into group safety, separating out who belongs and who does not, what and who is acceptable? Think of how a debate about a border wall kept the government in shut-down mode for weeks and is still not fully resolved while hundreds of thousands of affected workers have struggled to make ends meet. Think of the new attempt to bar transgendered individuals from serving in the military. We also have to ask how a congregation might be tempted to let its life in worship and mission get mired in preserving its identity based on human traditions more so than on the ever-evolving relationship with the living God?

³ In: D. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Westminster: John Knox, 2009), 260 - 262.

African American social psychologist, Christena Cleveland, offers an intriguing analysis of how we can get into reactivity mode and what is needed to move beyond this.⁴ Her insights can also reconnect us with the daring witness of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was willing to think and dream beyond “us versus them” and admonished us to do the same. Cleveland refers to Terror Management Theory as a starting point. The assumption is that humans are constantly living with some existential fear on a subconscious level. We are aware of our mortality and tend to run away from that awareness. When situations arise in which our mortality becomes more salient, we tend to cling to our cultural institutions and cling to our groups where we are clear about our sense of identity and belonging. Positively, this can mean finding solace in church and among our friends when we are struggling with illness or facing events like 9/11, etc. but it can also turn into singling out others as a common enemy or not worthy of our caring. We may cling to specific rules or traditions and lose touch with our own vitality.

We tend to cling to limited categorizations and do so quite unconsciously. Our brains are designed to categorize our world so we can organize it. It makes life easier but this can also lead to unnecessary suffering.⁵ Research also shows that the more stressed we feel, the more likely we are to want distinct categories and lose our tolerance for any fuzzy boundaries and anybody who doesn't toe the line.⁶ It saves mental and emotional energy. One of the ways we maintain these harsh boundaries is by thinking that “they” are all the same while “we” in our little in-group are all unique and bring varying gifts.

For example, Cleveland recounts the story of how she was hired by the board of a mostly white elite school on Long Island to help them deal with the fact that the few people of color who came as students or faculty or staff did not stay. When she proposed a research project involving extensive input from students, faculty and staff of color, the president of the board took her aside. He said, “Your ideas are not bad and we could do what you suggest or you and I could just talk and I could tell you why these people have a problem with this school.” In other words, “they” were all the same and a white man in leadership could explain why. It was also a way of saying, even if unconsciously, we don't need them, they have little to bring to this discussion, we just need my imagination and intelligence.

⁴ I saw her give talks as part of the CONSPIRE conference entitled “Everything Belongs.” This conference was held in 2016 by the Center for Action and Contemplation (www.cac.org).

⁵ We are aware of how categories associated with being elderly can lead others to be quite patronizing and disrespectful toward older people. We can add many more examples of categorical stereotyping around gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, economic status as well as religious or political conviction.

⁶ Interestingly, Cleveland quotes research that proves that people become especially destructive toward people within their own group who are beginning to blur lines, i.e. a pro-choice Republican.

As we remember the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. today, we are also reminded of how much, especially black men, are still generally categorized as dangerous, are far more likely to be arrested and to be sentenced than white men.⁷ Cleveland's own brother was stopped and searched by police four times during his final week at Yale Divinity School when he came within two blocks of the school. The recent sentencing of the Chicago police officer who shot Laquan McDonald 16 times begs the question of whether the officer would have acted differently had Laquan been white.⁸ How much were conscious and unconscious stereotypes driving the officer?

Cleveland argues that it is time to stop being "cognitive misers." Everyone practices miserliness in some context or another, toward some group of another. As a person of faith, Christena Cleveland reminds us that we are people with faith in God as a relational reality. The Trinitarian God is inherently relational, each person of the Trinity pouring itself out in an ever flowing exchange of loving mutuality toward the other. They are distinct but they cannot exist without each other and without mutuality, humility and equality. The father is father by virtue of relating to a son. The spirit is real and alive by virtue of the love exchanged between father and son and so on.

In truth, to be human is to image this relationship with each other because we are made in the image of God. We have to ask ourselves, can white people be truly human without being in deep interdependent relationship with indigenous or black people? Can black people be truly human without being in relationship with Asian people, Democrats with Republicans, Protestants with Catholics, etc., etc.? Christena Cleveland argues that we cannot reclaim the image of God without reclaiming our relationship with each other. This requires "cognitive generosity" rather than miserliness as we need to invest in actually coming to know each other. It also requires asking hard questions as Cleveland asks herself: "If everyone belongs, then who am I? What do I do when I am so used to knowing who I am by comparing myself to you? How will I deal with existential terror if I cannot separate myself from you?"

Christena Cleveland concludes that as hard as it is to remain open, "I will not be free until I walk down this path." MLK also once said that he had decided to stick with love because hate was too great a burden to bear. Our passage for today reminds us that God is not about miserliness and keeping people away from the table. God is about the wasteful abundance of spectacular wine, of life-giving joy. God is inviting all of us to a wedding feast of joy to celebrate. Jesus, as the Christ, represents a renewal of vitality and joy of the

⁷ Cleveland also refers to multiple studies in which white men are more likely to be seen as safe and productive.

⁸ The police department still has not implemented all recommendations given after this disastrous encounter, especially when it comes to accountability and restraint. Sadly, we can recite way too many examples of similar shootings.

relationship with God, now to be offered to the whole world. He will take a whole broken miserly world up onto the cross with him to release it into a new life of freedom in covenant with God.

Like Mary, let us remember that we do well to prod each other (and God) to make sure everyone gets a chance to taste the joy of God at God's table. There should be abundance for all and not the few. Christ does play in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and eyes not his to God through the features of our faces,⁹ including the face of Laquan McDonald.

⁹ Based on a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins, *As Kingfisher catch fire*.