

Living With Transformed DNA

John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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In honor of the scripture text from the Gospel this morning, I want to describe a meme I saw a couple of days ago. The picture was of an aisle at the wine store with a close up of some bottles of reds. Above it was the sign which read: Water. The caption? Jesus was here!

When I first looked at the texts read for this morning, my first thought was, ***Oh how much fun! The wedding at Cana. A happy text.*** Perhaps I am a bit partial, since I am beginning to think about Virgil's and my upcoming nuptials!

But as I studied the text and all that's been written about this first recorded miracle of Jesus in the Gospel of John, I was heartened even more. Many scriptures are joyful and hopeful, but these seem particularly so when it comes to looking at the way Jesus wants us to live.

So what can we learn from this wedding feast and the interesting way for this writer to describe the beginning of Jesus' public ministry? This story follows shortly after the account of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who called people to repentance and who baptized them in the River Jordan in the previous chapter. So in that same line of thinking, when Mary approaches Jesus to tell him that their hosts have run out of wine, the water that has changed into the finest of wines is drawn from the large ablution jars.

The rite of Ablution in ancient times was part of the system of purification practiced as a symbol of opening oneself to holiness before communion with the Deity. People were not allowed to enter a holy place or to approach the Deity with sacrifice or prayer without having first performed the rite of Ablution, which included the washing of one's hands and feet in that dry and desert climate.

Let's think about this for a minute. We are introduced to the idea of purity, repentance, making straight one's paths as the way to God. But what Jesus does here opens us up to a new way of thinking. Hospitality was as important in ancient times as it is today, maybe even more so. At weddings, wine, and the finest wines one could offer flowed without ceasing. So imagine if you were the host, and suddenly you discovered that your supply of wine has run dry, by some strange calculation! I would imagine the host would have felt great embarrassment, and even shame. He wasn't providing for his guests adequately.

Enter Mary and Jesus. In this stunning turn of purpose, the containers used for ritual purity suddenly become a source of festivity and joy. Embarrassment and shame turn to love and abundance. In this act, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus helps us understand the world differently, not as a profane place from which we need to be cleansed in order to approach God. Rather, the relationship with God-in flesh, is transformative. We are invited to be in the world with joy and assurance that we will have all we need...so much so, that we can generously then give to others. This abundance of God is experienced in the church community as well. That is echoed in our other text as well. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, all the gifts and skills we need for ministry are provided, in abundance. No one is more sacred or special than any other. It is the same Spirit given to everyone but shared in different ways, according to the needs of the community. And those gifts are to be used for the glory of God to build up others.

What does this look like in real life? Here's a story. A true story. Kristine Levine was just 5 years old when her mother scooped her up and headed to the coast of Oregon. They didn't take a thing with them. Her mother told her, "we have empty hands so that we can catch new blessings."

They also had empty pockets. Seems Kristine's mother, in despair for a variety of reasons, had drank away what little savings they had. She had no job and no way to support them. Her hope was that this new place, near the ocean would bring a do-over for them.

They found a small cottage, a motel room with a kitchenette, really. They never said it was their home, it was just Number Six. Kristine's mother paid the first month's rent, bought a sack of potatoes and some ketchup. Then she enrolled her in the kindergarten a block away, and they began their new life. Based in shame, with a hope and a dream.

That shame rested deep inside like DNA. When you don't have enough, or even when you don't FEEL like you have enough, it often translates to-- You aren't enough.

Kristine wasn't excited about school. Instead she thought, at her young age, that she should be helping to support their family, doing her part. Maybe even a paper route...that was after she heard her mother on the pay phone, begging her father for the \$75 child support check, which he had said he would send as soon as possible.

Shame and unworthiness run deep. It's as deep as our DNA.

Kristine knew the potato supply was running low. Her mother continued to look for work, but there were only two or three restaurants within walking distance of Number Six. The car they had blew up almost as soon as they got there so she gave it away. She didn't want to get a job in a bar because she was still trying earnestly to stop drinking.

The desperation was growing. One night, staring out the window, her mother let out a sigh. Without turning around she said, "Do you see that out there? Those people have let their garden grow over. The cabbages have gone to seed now. They'd never know or care if I just snuck over and took one for you."

The quivering in her voice scared Kristine. Kristine says, "She turned to me, she wiped her eyes, and with a look so cool she could have been mad at me, she said, 'If I were a thief I would go over there and steal those rotten cabbages for you. But I am not a thief.'"

Without another word, her mother passed her, opened the front door and walked out of Number Six. She left the door open and Kristine followed. She walked down five cottages and knocked on the door to Number One, a larger cottage where an old man and his wife lived. They were their neighbors, but they had no idea who they were.

The old lady opened the door and Kristine wove around her mother so she could see inside. "This is my daughter, Kristine. We have no food, she's had nothing to eat but potatoes for a month and now we don't even have any of those left. I don't care about myself but could you please give her something to eat?"

The old woman was short and fat, she had dark skin and black hair twisting around her head. Her name was Anita Vanover. Her husband was a tall white man, who was just called, Van. Kristine could see inside Anita's cottage; the smells coming from it made her drool. Anita and Van's table was set and they obviously were just sitting down to eat too.

Kristine didn't remember Anita saying anything to her mother, or even asking her husband first if she could give them something, but she remembers her packing up her table. The pot roast, the carrots, the gravy... and the potatoes, she handed it all to her mother. No questions. No judgement.

It didn't end there. Anita and Van had friends who owned one of the restaurants her mom had tried to get a job in earlier. Anita talked to them and they hired her, while Anita and Van became Kristine's caretakers in the evening.

Kristine recalls, "Quite literally, they saved my mother and me... I don't think Anita and Van thought they were saving lives or changing forever the path of a little one. I think they thought they were doing what they were supposed to do— when a woman with a little girl comes to the door and says they need to eat, what more needs to be said or done? They probably figured it's just food. Anita gave so effortlessly, so quickly, I doubt she ever thought about it again. But that one moment taught me a lesson about giving that I have never forgotten. Thirty years later there came a day when I'd pass that lesson on to my own children."

Kristine then tells the story that her daughter's school had a food drive, and she was excited to collect food for it. Even at ten years old, her daughter had a strong sense of community.

She went to their pantry and started bagging up the canned and dry goods. She said to her mother, "Oh, I'll put in the green beans, I don't like those... I'll save the Kraft macaroni and cheese we can give them some no name brand..." As Kristine watched her, she realized that her daughter, as generous as she already was, as GOOD as she was, she knew nothing about giving. I had taught her nothing.

She didn't know about Anita and Van, she didn't know about Number Six.

She didn't know that she could see the face of a hungry child if she'd looked long enough at her own mother. So, I told her. I told her that my kindergarten teacher thought I was "retarded" because I was so hungry, I didn't perform well in school and was always slower than the rest of the class. I told her that Anita could have just gone to her cupboard and made me a peanut butter sandwich, and my mother and I would have been so grateful. But she didn't. She gave the best that she had.

At the end of her blog posting, Kristine turns to her audience with this: *The biggest problem with poverty is the shame that comes with it. So, when you give the best you have to someone in need, it translates into something much deeper to the receiver.*

It means that they are worthy. If it's not good enough for you, it's not good enough for those in need, either. When you give the best you have, it does more than feed an empty belly, it feeds the soul.

Those are wise words which may inform our giving. But Jesus teaches us something more in this text. While no one in this room may be in poverty—physically. We may still carry the DNA of feeling we don't have enough and or/we aren't enough. That then taints any of our giving. With that state of "not having enough" we don't give of ourselves, our time or talents or money out of a sense of abundance, of joy...because deep in our DNA, we don't feel we have enough or ARE enough. We have to scramble to keep it all together.

Jesus shows us in this text, and again and again throughout the Gospel message, that the Creator of the Universe transforms us from the inside out. Our DNA literally changes from unworthiness and shame of lack, to abundance, joy and gratitude. I don't care what your bank account says...it's about the inner attitude. Jesus shows us, our inner reality affects our outer reality. There was no question for him when he saw what was needed. Out of his sense of identity and abundance, he gave and transformed his surroundings. May we do the same.

The other day, I heard this powerful in another area question: "what is it that wants to come into the world through you?" The question has stayed with me in a haunting way. It's like a Word for the year. I think this must be the origin of art, music and all beauty, love, mercy and kindness toward others. It makes me wonder what is keeping it from coming into the world through me? Am I hindering what is seeking to come alive in the world, and if so how? The presence of so much rage, cruelty, bitterness and fear in the world block the beauty, smother the kindness, and undermine community. Here in worship, we remind each other...we are called beloved. We have been given gifts to use generously. Life is a celebration to be lived out with an abundance of love and grace.

May it be so! Amen!! (to read Kristine's story, go to:<https://medium.com/@kristinelevine/i-am-a-little-too-fat-im-a-little-too-generous-i-think-i-know-why-e97cd25b7eeb?fbclid=IwAR0l3dmx2dGF7LSU1ITmt8-0ptMpfT-7SlbMI6doTadGt6bFbMOX5JfaFCQ>)

Benediction

Why worry about the loaves and fishes?

If you say the right words, the wine expands.

If you say them with love

and the felt ferocity of that love

and the felt necessity of that love,

the fish explode into many.

Imagine him, speaking,

and don't worry about what is reality,

or what is plain, or what is mysterious.

If you were there, it was all those things.

If you can imagine it, it is all those things.

Eat, drink, be happy.

Accept the miracle.

Accept, too, each spoken word

spoken with love.

Logos. Why I Wake Early.

Mary Oliver