

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

WINE INTO WATER

ON HUMAN SUFFERING AND THE LOVE OF GOD

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January 20, 2013 ~ The Second Sunday after the Pentecost
John 2: 1-11

In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, there's a parable told by Ivan to his brother Alyosha entitled "The Grand Inquisitor." Whereas Alyosha is a novice monk, Ivan is a terribly disenchanted and pessimistic man, down on the state of humanity, the world, and their relation to God. The two of them are sitting in this restaurant, and Ivan recounts for Alyosha a poem he has written, a poem imagining what would have happened had Jesus returned to earth during the Spanish Inquisition, of all things. Recall that the Inquisition was a 15th century institution of Ferdinand II and Isabella I designed to enforce and maintain orthodoxy, or right belief, by any means necessary. So Jesus is returning to Seville during what Dostoyevsky writes was "the most terrible time of the Inquisition, when fires were lighted every day to the glory of God, and in the splendid *auto da fé* the wicked heretics were burnt." Jesus performs a miracle on the steps of the Seville cathedral, bringing back to life a little seven year old girl whose funeral procession he has interrupted. All this is seen by the Grand Inquisitor, "an old man, almost ninety, tall and erect, with a withered face and sunken eyes" who, with an outstretched finger, commands Jesus's arrest and sentences him to be burned at the stake. Jesus, it seems, is a liability his church simply cannot tolerate.

They have no wine, O Father. They have no wine.

Once jailed, the Inquisitor visits Jesus in his cell to explain why this is so. Recall with me the temptation of Christ by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus faces three temptations: to turn stones into bread, to cast Himself from the Temple and be saved by the angels, who would catch him, and to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. The Inquisitor explains that, had Jesus turned the stones into bread, he would have guaranteed that those for whom he provided food would have followed him forever; had Jesus cast Himself down from the Temple and angels swooped down to catch him, there could have been none who doubted his power and divinity, guaranteeing their faith and obedience; and had Jesus accepted Satan's offer to make him ruler over all the world, he could have guaranteed the whole world's salvation. The Inquisitor says Jesus denied himself these things in order to leave human freedom intact but this was, quite simply, a mistake. Human beings with freedom are wretched little things, completely lost in the morass of moral indecision, and confused by a world that withers, decays, stinks, and dies. So the Church has corrected Jesus's mistake it has sought to feed, to awe, and to rule, so that the people *can be happy*, if ignorant.

The Inquisitor then reveals their secret, saying: “We are not working with Thee, but with *him* [*Satan*]*—that is our mystery.* í Just eight centuries ago, we took from him what Thou didst reject with scorn, that last gift he offered Thee, showing Thee all the kingdoms of the earth. We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth í we shall triumph and shall be Caesars, and then we shall plan the universal happiness of man. í And all will be happy, all the millions of creatures except the hundred thousand who rule over them. For only we who guard the mystery, shall be unhappy.ö

The people, O Father—they have no wine. They have no wine.

But then something remarkable happens: Jesus, who has just heard from the mouthpiece of his Church the story of their complete undoing of his work on earth and of their betrayal of him for the arms of Satan himself, this Jesus just looks at him. “The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible,” Dostoyevsky writes. “But He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered.ö And he let Jesus go.

How magnificent is this God’s love for us, that he looks his church—the church that has squandered its inheritance, betrayed its mission, ruined its gift, indicted its savior—he looks at *this* church, looks him square in the eyes, takes him by the hand, and kisses him. Kisses him despite it all. Kisses him because he loves him.

Do whatever he tells you, his mother said to the servants. Fill the jars with water, he said. And they filled them up to the brim.

It’s against our mores and codes a little, this kiss. It’s too personal, too close, Jesus kissing this old man square on the lips. And yet this is how we describe the incarnation, the in-meat-ment of the God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God assumes not just any human nature. He assumes *ours*. The God of the universe assumes *our* nature, *our* flesh. This isn’t some vague, irrelevant metaphysical platitude. I mean that in the first century CE, God assumed the very nature of all of us human beings sitting in this room this morning.

Jesus Christ is divinity kissing humanity; he is the marriage of heaven and earth. This is actually precisely how St. Augustine, one of our great patristic theologians, interprets our Gospel reading from John this morning. The wedding is not just any wedding, and this wine is not just any wine. St. Augustine writes, “For the Word was the bridegroom, and human flesh was the bride í That womb of the Virgin Mary í was his bridal chamber.ö The Word, that is, the Son, the second person of the Trinity, is, through the incarnation, married to our human flesh in the bridal chamber of Our Blessed Mother’s womb. I want for you to feel how embodied this is, even if it makes you a little uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is okay. It’s a little carnal; it’s a little fleshy, but it’s profoundly Christian.

It’s spectacularly intimate, this love, closer to us than we are to ourselves, this divinity that transforms us and changes us and makes us whole, this God who marries humanity in Jesus.

But our world isn’t always perfect. It isn’t always beautiful. This kiss with which Jesus blesses the Inquisitor—that’s so mind-bogglingly extravagant, so terribly beautiful—we have to come to terms with

the fact that Ivan says afterward of it that though the kiss glows in [the old man's] heart, [he still] adheres to his idea[s]. There are moments when we, like Mary, look at Jesus and we say: "They have no wine." See, as Mother Anne taught us a few weeks ago, in Scripture, wine represents the Kingdom of God and the restoration of our relationship with God, as well as the joy and fulfillment of human life at its best. Running with St. Augustine, then, reading this passage from John, the wedding at Cana, as the wedding of God and humanity in Christ, we are confronted with the audacious confrontation of Jesus by his mother: "They have no wine, Jesus. They have no wine. They've run out!" The joy's all gone. The life's been suffocated out of us, and we can't feel you anymore. Whatever you tried to do and accomplish in the incarnation, God, *it doesn't look like it's working!*

We know what this feels like, don't we? We know what it is to run out of wine. It's like children, little children, gunned down in their classrooms. *Jesus, we have no wine.* My spouse left me. *Jesus, we have no wine.* I don't know what to do with my life. *Jesus, we have no wine.* All my job applications came back unfulfilled. *Jesus, we have no wine.* I'm lost in the suffocation of a depression I can't escape. *Jesus, we have no wine.* I'm in a hole; I've told so many lies, and I don't know how to get out. *Jesus, we have no wine.* The poor freeze in our streets. Our gay and lesbian teens contemplate suicide with startling frequency. And is it any surprise that we assassinated someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life we celebrate as a nation this weekend? Recall that when Triune love came down for us in person in Jesus, we killed *him* too! *Jesus, O Jesus, we have no wine!*

Often, I'm Mary in this story. I'm looking out at this world, looking at *our lives*, and I cry out to God: we don't have any wine. I pray that we, in the midst of all this horror, may have the faith to say, as Mary does, "Do whatever he tells you." Notice, Mary says this to the servants despite the fact Jesus has pretty much just brushed her off. Mary trusts what's coming. May we have the strength to wait, the wisdom to see Jesus having jars of water filled, filled to the brim, jars of water transformed into wine, ordinary life transformed into supernatural communion.

See, turning Jesus turning water into wine in our own lives, I think, often isn't all that flashy. Note that in this story from John, there's no "BOOM" or "BANG," no smoke and mirrors, just jars of water and one really shocked steward. Maybe that's the secret, that God's love is as simple, and yet as transformative, as a kiss, a kiss that comes to us unconditionally. Water into wine in our lives doesn't mean the hurt goes away. It means God working *through* the hurt, means God crying with us and holding our hands, means feeling God's joy in the *midst* of pain and suffering. It isn't the outright removal of pain and suffering by divine fiat.

We cry out, *they have no wine!*, and water turns to wine if we have chance to notice it in communities banding together to take care of each other; betrayed spouses putting their lives back together, friends drying their eyes; adventures growing out of indirection; invention springing out of empty time; healing emanating from caring families and loving doctors; forgiveness and honesty rising from relationships that seemed broken beyond repair.

Water into wine isn't God fixing everything. Water into wine is God granting you peace and joy *in the midst of it all.*

Divinity and humanity, heaven and earth,
God and us, married to each other in Christ,
kissing each other softly. This is God
working through creation to restore
relationship and heal all that divides us from
one another. I can think of few visions more
appropriate to contemplate on the weekend
we honor the legacy of Dr. King. The kiss
glows in his heart, and with due reverence to
Ivan Karamazov, I don't think anything can
ever be the same.

The history of the universe is the
story of our love affair with the God who
creates us, and love is strong as death.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*