



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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"Subordinary, Ordinary and Extraordinary"

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock am service, January 17, 2016
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany—Based on John 2: 1-11*

While packing up to move from Dallas several months ago, I was flipping through old record albums (remember those?), and I noticed a story told on the jacket of Bob Dylan's song "John Wesley Harding." (One never knows where the preacher will receive inspiration!)

It seems that three kings made a long journey (sound familiar?) in order to discover the secret of music. They arrived at the home of the Great Musician, and he asked them what they were seeking. One replied, "We want to learn the secret of music." The Great Musician asked, "How deep do you want to go?" One king responded, "Well, I have to be honest, I'm not really interested; I just came along for the ride." The second king said, "I only want to go deep enough to be able to say that I've been there." The third king responded, "I want to learn all that I can ... I want to be immersed in the mystery of music."

On the larger scale, these three kings have described three distinct approaches to life. Sometimes we don't want to learn anything; we're just along for the ride. And there are times when we don't want to risk very much; we just go deep enough to say that we've been there. And there are times when we are compelled to immerse ourselves in the love of God and God's world, to give full devotion and ultimate commitment, to set out fully in a life of discipleship.

This morning I'd like to look at these three dynamics of the religious life. I believe these three realities are depicted in our Gospel text, in the symbol of the six stone jars: First, empty jars, then jars filled with water, and finally jars full and over-flowing with new wine.

First, Jesus finds at the wedding reception in Cana, six empty jars.

What an apt description of many lives in our own world. An existence of empty jars is a life that has become void, shadowy, and depressive.

Sometimes we are invited to the wedding banquet of God's presence and bounty, where we are bid to celebrate, partake and participate, and yet our response is as if the wine has run out. Laughter and joy have dissipated; meaning and purpose have ceased. It's as if we're just coasting, like we're just along for the ride. Or it's as if we're standing in the corner like six stone jars—cold, empty and dark.

It's the experience of a vocational life devoid of energy and/or relationships not working. It's tension between spouses, partners or friends, and disagreement between children and parents. It's isolation and loneliness on the personal level, and geo-political rancor on the national and international level.

In his landmark book of some years ago, "The Taste of New Wine," Keith Miller wrote the following about discoveries in his own life: "One year I was feeling fairly secure. We were out of debt. I was free. My heart symptoms had subsided. My relationships with my family seemed to be good; I had recently retired. Now I was ready for the serenity and joy I'd worked so hard for all my life.

"But that first week following retirement, I felt worse than I had in many years. After dinner I found myself anxious and sad, a tight band of fear around my chest and my mind was filled with frantic negative pictures about the future. I saw myself as a tired old man who wasn't of any use to anyone. I got up and went for a long walk around

the neighborhood. I was really frightened and shivering in the cool breeze. I had all the things I'd always thought would make me happy, and now I was miserable.

"During the next two years I worked with a counselor. I received honest feedback from a caring soul, and together we discovered a mystery hidden from me since childhood. I saw that crouching behind my compulsive working and overachieving was a lonely and starved self. It was like I was a lost child. I saw also that I was almost completely self-centered, one who puts himself in the center and tries desperately to control his world and all of the people in it."

What's the response? God responds in today's gospel text in the person of Jesus, who says, "Fill these six empty jars with water." Jesus doesn't leave anyone standing alone, empty and cut off!

One king said, I'm not really interested, I just came along for the ride." Jesus meets us in that place and compels us to move from emptiness to fullness. God moves us, first, from subordinary existence to ordinary reality.

Beginning in Baptism, we are filled up with "water." It's the stage of the Christian life where most of us live, most of the time. We've been baptized into the faith, we realize something of the journey of faith, we halfway enjoy the presence and grace of God, and, while we don't set the world on fire, we attempt, sometimes feebly, to exercise our faith in the world. As one king said, "I only want to go deep enough to say I've been there." This is life in the ordinary lane!

But Jesus seems to be declaring, "That's not enough!" Because just going deep enough to say we've been there causes the water of life to become murky, drab, sedentary, bland. It's the blank stares and sullen faces on the subway, the solitary expressions of colleagues at work; it's the rote memory of the church's liturgy; it's the routine in relationships. God doesn't leave us in the ordinary. God wants to take our murky, stale water and instill renewal and freshness. God seeks to make the ordinary into the extraordinary: It is the depiction in the Gospel story of Jesus making water into wine.

A father shared with me last spring the experience of going home after a long day. He was reasonably satisfied with life, but had that strange feeling of the flat line of existence. During the family blessing before eating, he was surprised when his eight-year old shared a prayer she had written for school chapel:

Hello God! This is Katy. I'm fine, how are you? Thanks for the earth,
for the sky, birds and stuff. Thanks for mashed potatoes, but not so much
for lima beans. Thanks for my school, for my teacher, and even for Billy who
bothers me nearly every day. And thanks for my mom and dad, for books, for friends
and for shelter, and good health. Please help Marcia's grandfather who is sick.
Please help poor people, and children who don't have families. Please help Poppy
feel better. Amen.

In the daily flat line of work and family traffic, the father was surprised to be caught up in this prayer, as if through his daughter, God had lifted his spirits to another level.

The father had been given an experience of the third level of the journey. He was being moved from ordinary to extraordinary. The third king said, "I want to be immersed in the mystery of music." It is in Christ we find the grace to move us into a deeper, more profound journey.

In her work "Walking on Water," Madeleine L'Engle speaks of the role of "birth-givers." She writes, "Listen to me. All of living is a huge lake. There are great birth-givers like Tolstoy and Sts. Francis and Clare and C.S. Lewis, and the person around the corner and across the breakfast table. Sometimes their influence is a little trickle on the surface of the great lake, and sometimes like an ever-flowing stream. Each of us can be birth-givers, but we can't assume our role until we've been given new birth, like Jesus changing water into wine."

This weekend we honor and celebrate a birth-giver, Martin Luther King, Jr. In his famous dream speech, delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, he compelled America to move from the subordinary, to the ordinary, and finally to the extraordinary.

So where are we right now? Where are you? Where am I? Well, on the national front, we're closer to his dream now than we were four decades ago. But, we have to admit, while we have moved from the subordinary of racism and

Jim Crow laws, we have stopped the train very often at the station called "mere toleration." We have come to tolerate one another, but the gleaming station of genuine brotherhood and sisterhood is still down the line. At the station of toleration, differences aren't respected and celebrated, they're merely tolerated. At that station we don't need to know each other and understand one another, because "we only want to go deep enough to say we've been there."

"I have a dream," he said, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

So, I ask you today, and I ask myself today: Where are you? Where am I?

Empty? Full of murky, drab, stale water? Or full of new wine?

Wherever we are, God will meet us there. And if we're open, God will move us from the subordinate, to the ordinary, to the extraordinary. The third king said, "I want to immerse myself in the mystery of music." May we be found lining up behind that third king.

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