

On Water and Wine-By Pastor Susan Garofalo

The year was 1863. The place was a seemingly abandoned army outpost, Fort Sedgewick, on the Western Frontier: the term “remote” would be an understatement. Isolated, would better describe the place in which Lt. John Dunbar of the Union Army found himself. Lt. Dunbar had gotten what he wanted, at least in part: an assignment in a place he had always wanted to see: the Western Frontier, before it gave way to the Western push, the idea of Manifest Destiny, which promised to bring settlers to the wide open plains of what we now call the contiguous States of the United States of America. The rolling hills, the wheat fields, the bison and other animals in their natural habitat even the Native American tribal lands...all of it..would soon slip into the annals of history and folklore. Lt. Dunbar could not have known when he first arrived, how his life would change, how he would change; transform is a better term, when he first stood before the abandoned edifice that was Fort Sedgewick.

If you are a movie buff, like me, you know that Fort Sedgewick, was not a historical outpost. It didn't exist. Nor did John Dunbar, for that matter. While this name was the name of a real person who lived during this era, that individual was not a Lt. in the Union Army. Even though our Lt. Dunbar is a fictional character in a fictional story, *Dances With Wolves*, the change we witness in him, offers a powerful illustration of transformation and how it is experienced in daily living. The film focuses on an important period in the life of this fictional soldier, one that informs his actions throughout the remainder of the story.

Our Passage this morning, captures an important period in Jesus' life: the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, and the moment when the disciples first believed in him. What I love about this story is who Jesus is with in this moment, why they are there and how God, through Jesus, reveals Jesus' Divine identity to

the world: through, of course, something impossible: the miracle of turning water into wine.

Before we continue, there are some considerations we should take into account. We know that the Gospel of John differs from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We know that even amongst these three that the story of Jesus' life, and ministry differs at times. In order to have a full understanding of who Jesus was, and why he came to us, we, as believers, must piece the accounts together, much like a puzzle. Through Matthew, we remember that Jesus is the Son of David, whose genealogy originates in the story of Abraham. In Mark, we remember Jesus' ministry. In Luke, we experience all of Jesus' life: from the prophecy of his coming through his ascension. In Luke, Jesus is our High Priest, before God, in Heaven. And, then, there is John, who offers us the opportunity to weave these stories into an incredible, holy fabric of love, and compassion; mercy and grace.

It is through John's eyes that we meet, Jesus, Mary, Jesus' mother, and the disciples, on the occasion of a wedding feast in Cana, a village in Galilee. In this Gospel, Mary appears twice: here, at the wedding, and at the foot of the Cross when Jesus is Crucified. From this, we understand the importance of Mary's presence at the wedding: it connects her to the entire story of Jesus: from the prophecy and promise she received from the Angel Gabriel-through his Resurrection: Promised Messiah, Beloved Son and Savior.

Jesus' disciples were also present at the wedding feast, though not all have been named, as they are in other Gospels: Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and; more than likely, James and John, though, in the Gospel, James was not revealed. Again, what we have to remember about the Gospel of John is that it focuses on spiritual themes rather than historical events. It is important that the disciples are present; that they witnessed the onset of Jesus' ministry-that they witnessed the

miracle because it shaped them as believers. In the Gospel of John, this was the first of many moments when the disciples' faith in Jesus will be found.

So, Jesus, Mary and the disciples were invited to this wedding feast. To offer some context, a wedding celebration then, just like today, was a pretty big deal. It was usually held in the bridegroom's home. It was customary that the hosting family offer their guests the very best of everything, according to custom. So, it is important to note that, in those days, the food and wine were not served indiscriminately to the guests sitting at the same table. It was based on their social status. Some guests got the cheapest wine -- a mixture of wine, vinegar, and water -- like the one Jesus was offered on the cross (Luke 23:36), while others drank what we would term, from a grand reserve: a quality of wine that was offered only to the highest of nobility. So, having, not only enough food and wine, but also the right food and wine for such an occasion was important, not only due to expectations on the part of the guests, but for the hosts as well. To err in this regard in any way meant a very public disgrace that would not soon be forgiven, if ever.

This is where we meet Jesus, his mother and the disciples: at the moment, when the hosts worst fears materialize, as the wine ran out.

It was Mary who prompted Jesus into action. Even though Mary was not mentioned by name, her presence represented what she knew about her son: that Jesus was the Son of God, the True Messiah. She had undoubtedly witnessed extraordinary things that Jesus had done, or heard of them, about Jesus throughout his life. Even though Jesus seemed to dismiss his mother, Mary remained faithful. She did not correct him, but says, instead "Do as he asks" to the stewards. She

knew that Jesus would act even though his initial response to her urging appeared less than respectful.

And what did Jesus do? He delivered, didn't he? He transformed water into wine and transformed unbelievers and relatively new believers into faithful followers: all under the radar of the hosts and the majority of the guests that were present; All of whom knew only that the wine kept flowing-though perhaps better in quality than before. What they missed, was its abundance: it was now more than they could possibly ever partake of. It was fragrant, evidence of the richness of its origin, and it was offered in grace: a gift without the slightest judgement or hesitation. While most who were in attendance missed the significance of this extravagant gift:

Mary knew. The disciples that were present knew. The stewards knew; that what they had just witnessed was a miracle. Something extraordinary had taken place, at the hands of Jesus: from a spiritual perspective: pure water, the element significant in baptism, transformed to wine; the element of which we partake in the Lord's supper, that reminds us of the New Covenant that Jesus offers to every believer in every age, a Covenant made possible through his sacrifice; one with which we join him through our baptism...

Now THAT is what I would call, a miracle.

After considering this, the story of Lt. John Dunbar seems far removed from the story of Jesus at the wedding festival, and the transformation of water into wine. Lt John Dunbar is a fictional character in a fictional story. He is not God. He is not even real. Yet, in the story, his character, in part, fosters what can only be described as a miracle, even today. When Lt. Dunbar first arrived at the outpost, he brought with him, his experience, his understanding of what it meant to live north and east in the US, during the late 1800's. As stated, he was a Lt in the Union Army. He was Caucasian, educated, faithful/honorable, kind. Prior to his

assignment to Fort Sedgewick, Lt. Dunbar fought in the Civil War, in Tennessee, where his opponent was not all-together different from him. Now, he was faced with a different kind of war, that was being fought on the Frontier: History tells us the Dakota War was fought in 1862 against the Dakota Sioux , and the Colorado War was fought from 1863-1865 against what is known as the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. So the opponent that Lt. Dunbar faced in this new post assignment, was quite different from the opponent he faced in Tennessee. This new opponent did not look like him, did not speak the same language-came from a completely different culture; with completely different values and beliefs. The possibility of Lt Dunbar and the Sioux to find common ground, other than the land beneath their respective feet, looked pretty bleak at first. To put it plainly, it would take a miracle, something extraordinary, something intentional for He and the Sioux to communicate, let alone work out any kind of peaceful arrangement. Yet that is exactly what happened. A miracle.

Lt. Dunbar intentionally met with the Sioux, ready to offer the best of who he was as an officer in the Army, and as a human being. The story almost immediately began to change, once he decided to do this. The characters: Lt. Dunbar and the Sioux almost from the onset of this connection, step away from the differences that divide them, and focus, instead, on the search for what will connect them. This was, by no means, as easy as it sounds. By the time the reality of war and conflict caught up with Lt. Dunbar, and the Sioux, the transformation was complete. When other officers finally manage to report to Ft. Sedgewick in search of him, Lt. Dunbar-at least the Lt. Dunbar they were expecting to meet, was nowhere to be found. In his place, they would find, instead "*Dances With Wolves*", a Sioux warrior, a trusted leader, and husband of "*Stands With A Fist*". Preconceptions about who the Sioux were, who the "white people" were and the fear of the unknown on both sides, fell away to peaceful coexistence,

understanding, community, and; yes, Love. Upon being named, “*Dances With Wolves*”, Lt Dunbar was invited to become something other than who he had been before. He was transformed through the experience of knowing the Sioux, and they were transformed through the experience of knowing him.

Iranaeus, one of the early Christian fathers of 2nd Century, once said that “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” God desires us to flourish, to enjoy and take delight in his creation even as God did at the dawn of time, and what is more, through the saving death of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, our mortal selves, our sinful selves are transformed into being exactly who God has always intended us to be for one another’s sake.

God’s heart breaks with every shadow of darkness. God’s heart breaks over the spectacle of poverty. God’s heart breaks at the suffering of every injustice. God’s heart breaks when people in his abundant creation experience want.

Running out of wine for wedding guests who may well have had their fill already may not seem like the kind of dire want or need that would break God’s heart—and perhaps it wasn’t. John more than likely used this story to remind us that wherever God’s Messiah is, expect abundance, expect miracles, expect transformation.

Jesus, after all, did not offer a little more wine, but rather hundreds of gallons more. He did not make a cheap or watery wine but a vintage better than most had ever tasted. It was an extravagant response evidence that the glory of God provided more than was requested, more than could be imagined. It was the glory of God giving access—if even for just a little while—to the abundant fullness with which God created us all, in the beginning. It was the glory of God that

molds us, shapes and yes, transforms our lives, like a potter transforms his or her clay. We long for that Glory, do we not? We come here, searching for it, every Sunday, do we not?. We go out into the community, praying all the while that we do what God calls us to do, through Jesus, the Divine Miracle Worker, with intention, in faith, and in humility, do we not?

When, oh when will we see the light of that glory? When will we experience the transformation that changes us from those who hold onto perceived roles and expectations – expecting so little of the other, to those who meet people where they are and intentionally forge a new road, a new way, a new life that promises the best of what we have to give, instead of the least?

I believe we will see it: When the hungry in our cities are fed, when the homeless are housed, when children can grow and flourish in safety, when the desolate are comforted and encouraged by a word of hope, when strangers from different lands seek one another out, respect one another, and live peacefully together, when the sad can dry their tears with comfort in knowing that God, will provide whatever it is that is needed, in abundance: all the while rescuing us, renewing us, transforming us. Amen.