



"When Water is Wine"

*The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
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John 2:1-12*

Today I want to share a few stories that biblical scholars might call "miracles accounts," three stories that were called to mind by John's account of "The Wedding at Cana." I'll begin with a story about Sarah Dougherty.

Sarah Dougherty is a one of the happiest people I know, but she hasn't always had such an ebullient personality. When I first met Sarah, she seemed highly intelligent, very attractive, and professionally successful; and yet, despite all of these good qualities, she also seemed surprisingly dour.

Sarah was not, in her earlier days, the kind of person who drew people to her, or who had a personality that commended her for service on the Board of Ministers and Deacons, which is, ironically, the context in which I came to know and love her.

In time, I came to understand that Sarah's once dour disposition was fostered by a great unhappiness that had been welling up in her for nearly twenty years. Sarah had always wanted to be a mother, but for Sarah, life just wasn't unfolding in the manner that she had hoped, nor that her Armenian mother had deemed conventional.

Despite having met and loved more than one man over the years, none of Sarah's amorous relationships flowered into matrimony. She might have spent her life like "Eleanor Rigby"¹ sweeping up rice at other people's weddings, or grieving the children she would never raise, but she didn't. Sarah had the audacity to believe that God's abundant joy was meant for her, and she was determined to experience that joy.

Sarah's testimony to this belief was expressed through a surprising announcement at the deacons' supper table one cold January evening. Just after my colleague (Jim) led the dinner prayer, and the kitchen staff began serving our meal, Jim ventured his usual dinner-discussion starter: "So friends, what's new?"

Sarah Dougherty, the most unlikely person to speak first, cleared her throat, patted her lips, and with firm resolve said, "I have some news. Next week, I'm getting on a plane, and flying to Bucharest to finalize my daughter's adoption."

¹ "Eleanor Rigby," the title and character featured in John Lennon and Paul McCartney's song by the same name.

Sarah's announcement was an absolute show-stopper. One-to-one dinner conversations came to a halt. People stopped chewing. Forks dropped. The room was completely silent. Then, finally, after a long and uncomfortable pause, Jim broke the ice by saying, "Wow, Sarah! Tells us more!" And she did.

Over the rest of our deacons' dinner, we learned of Sarah's life-long dream to become a mother, her disappointment that at the age of 40-something Mr. Right hadn't come along, and her decision several months earlier to contact an agency to begin the process of adopting a child from Eastern Europe.

We listened intently as Sarah told her story. At the end, the parish worker, exclaimed, "Oh Sarah, That's wonderful news! You're going to be a terrific mother." And she was right.

Others might have thought that by some cruel twist of fate Sarah would never drink "the good wine" that many enjoy in life, but she dared to believe differently. Sarah dared to believe that the good wine had been kept until she countered convention and adopted and raised her daughter as a single parent.

She had the audacity to believe that God had something more in store for her. Like Mary, at "the Wedding at Cana," Sarah believed in miracles—she believed that Jesus could turn water into wine—that God could and would fill that ever-deepening void in her life, and her belief in a Holy Host who had saved the best wine for later in her life became, for the Board of Ministers and Deacons, a sign of God's presence and glory, and we believed all over again, in a new and deeper way.

II

I learned this past week of the death of a woman whom I have admired greatly. Her name (most recently) was Mary Kinsman. I knew her as Mary Monroe. She was a pillar of First Baptist Church in Elmira, New York, which was the church across the street from The Park Church, where I served as Senior Pastor fifteen years ago. Mary and I became acquainted through a variety of ecumenical and civic functions, and as a result of the interest that the Monroes took in the clergy women in town. (You see, one of their daughters was a pastor, and they felt rather protective of the young clergy women in town, their pastor and I being two among that number.)

Mary's interest in me was also grounded in having spent her young life at Park Church, where she had been baptized and confirmed, and was later married to her first husband, Judge Donald Monroe.

Mary never mentioned it, but I assumed that she and Judge Monroe must have made some agreement about her moving her membership from The Park Church to First Baptist when they married—perhaps to keep peace in the family. Judge Monroe's grandparents, I understand, were founding members of First Baptist.

The Monroes were pillars of First Baptist and the City of Elmira. They seemed to be behind every good thing happening in our community, from ongoing support of the arts to the start-up of numerous social service organizations. As evidence of and in

appreciation for Mary's many contributions to the City of Elmira, the mayor, on the occasion of her 80th birthday declared the day "Mary Monroe Day."

Though the Monroes both came from money and were prosperous people, they lived relatively simple lives by comparison with their means. Their only extravagance was an occasional foray to Europe—they especially liked Paris—where they could keep up with their French, read and relax, tour a few galleries, attend concerts, and gaze at the historic marvels of the Old World.

When Judge Monroe died quite unexpectedly about ten years ago, not one but two churches wept, and an entire city mourned. We mourned not only the passing of a great man, but the void that his death left for our community and for his widow. Though the two had led somewhat divided lives by day, each evening they were reunited at the dinner table, where politics, theology and culture were thoroughly discussed, before venturing out together to any number of church and civic events.

Mary took the Judge's death very hard. For a year or so, she pulled back from their normal routine. She only left the house for worship and essential errands. Her children fretted and tried to intervene with cheerful visits and compelling invitations. Mary's friends wrung their hands and wondered if she would ever be the same.

One day, their question was answered as Mary, like a butterfly finding her way out of its chrysalis, emerged for the monthly gathering of her best friends—"The Birthday Girls"—and announced that she had registered for an Elderhostel in Paris and would be leaving in a few weeks to study and wander the haunts that she and the Judge had so much enjoyed on previous visits. The Birthday Girls were thrilled and breathed a deep sigh of relief, thinking that this meant that Mary could go on with her life, even though her life-long companion had gone to God.

Fast forward several months now, in your mind's eye, to an autumn gathering of the Birthday Girls. Imagine Mary's friends' surprise when she returned from what stretched from a two-week Elderhostel in Paris to a two-month excursion in the United Kingdom, and shared the news that she had met an Englishman in Paris, who had swept her off her feet, and that the two were about to be married.

Quietly—OK not so quietly—Mary's friends speculated that she had lost her mind, that she was about to be swindled out of her family fortune, and that her vulnerable heart was on the verge of being irreparably broken. Friends generally mean well, and these gals certainly did, but Mary was no fool, and neither was Keith Kinsman, the man who became her second husband.

Before they announced their marriage, Mary and Keith spent a good deal of time anticipating the hysteria that their well-meaning children and friends could unleash. So they prepared and signed a prenuptial agreement to share with their children. They made preplanned funeral arrangements. They sold both of their homes and bought two smaller cottages, one on each side of the Pond, where they bided their time, based on whichever venue offered the best weather and the greatest opportunity to reconnect with children and grandchildren.

Finally having abated the greatest fears of family and friends, and the two were married in a small family wedding—make that two small family weddings—one in Elmira and the

other in England, so that both families could attend without inordinate expense in time or money. Their weddings came off without much pomp and circumstance, except for the addition of a couple of outrageous parties thrown by their elated loved ones, who came to realize that God had kept the best wine for Mary and Keith until then, and they and their loved ones, savored every drop.

III

This weekend, we celebrate the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In many ways, the festivities of this weekend have evolved into a way for our nation to not only honor the life and witness of a great man who led one of the most significant social change movements in our history, but it has also become a time for us to take stock of how far we have progressed and how far we have to go in the effort to achieve civil rights for all people.

“The Wedding at Cana,” which is our gospel reading for today, may not at first blush seem like a text that lends itself to a sermon on civil rights. That is, until we realize that marriage has not always been affirmed in our nation for people of color, to inter-racial couples, to persons with disabilities, and with a few exceptions, marriage equality is not yet extended to same-gender couples in our nation.

Some of us may remember the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in 1967 on *Loving v. Virginia*, when the Court declared unconstitutional Virginia's anti-miscegenation statute, which forbade marriage between a man and a woman of different races, thereby ending all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the U.S.,² and overturning anti-miscegenation statutes that were still on the books in 16 states.

The case was brought by Mildred Jeter (an African and Native American woman) and Richard Perry Loving (an Anglo-American man), who were residents of Virginia, and who had been married in Washington, D.C. (in 1958) in an effort to evade the laws of Virginia. Upon their return to the Commonwealth, the two were arrested, pled guilty, and were each sentenced to one year in jail, with their sentences being suspended for 25 years if they agreed to leave Virginia.

In a Neanderthal tone, the trial judge that ruled against them paraphrased in his decision an interpretation of race, claiming that God created the races and placed them on separate continents with no intention of us mixing.

Friends since childhood, and loved by both of their families, Mildred and Richard Loving were exiled to the District of Columbia for four years, where they fought for the right to have their marriage recognized by their home state, and to live there together as husband and wife.³ The Lovings' case, which was based on the fourteenth amendment, was ultimately victorious in 1967, when the Supreme Court unanimously overturned their Virginia convictions ruling that “Marriage is one of the basic civil rights of man.”

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loving_v._Virginia

³ Go to <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117098/plotsummary> for info about the film, “Mr. and Mrs. Loving.”

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, such laws went uncontested in several states until the year 2000 when Alabama became the last to remove its laws against mixed-race marriage.

Despite numerous legal obstacles, and a culture permeated by racism which creates and sustains such obstacles, Mildred and Richard Loving had the audacity to believe in their right to marry regardless of race. Many have believed, and many state laws upheld views that proclaimed that there wasn't enough wedding wine to go around for mixed race couples, but the Lovings had the audacity to believe that God's joy was meant for them, and they inevitably drank their fill of the best wine though long after they had proclaimed their vows to one another.

IV

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on *Loving v. Virginia* serves, in part, as a reminder that we have made progress, but that we have a long way to go towards achieving full racial and marriage equality in our world.

In October of 2004, Stephanie and I were privileged to attend the wedding of dear friends in Massachusetts, the Rev. Ann B. Day and Donna Endberg. Their wedding invitation arrived in the mail several weeks in advance. We were a bit surprised, but delighted to receive it. After all, Ann and Donna were a lesbian couple, and the ink hadn't yet dried on the Massachusetts' (then new) statute granting same-gender couples the right to marry. Also at issue was the fact that the two had been living together for nearly 25 years. At some point, we mused, don't people just decide to have anniversary parties and forgo the wedding?

Well, maybe some couples, but not our friends, Ann and Donna, and we were pleased to accept their invitation.

We accepted because we wanted to celebrate with two friends who are very dear to us, and because we wanted to honor two people who have devoted their lives to human rights work, especially within the United Church of Christ. Among other things, Ann and Donna have been leaders in our national "Open and Affirming" movement that is grounded in the 1985 General Synod resolution, "Calling on UCC Congregations, Associations and Conferences to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming...[by adopting a]...policy of non-discrimination in employment, volunteer service and membership policies with regard to sexual orientation..."⁴

This church, Eden Church, was among the first 300 congregations in our denomination (of 5,000 congregations) to participate in an ONA study process, which ultimately led to our decision over a decade ago to embrace the ONA policy that is at the top of our Sunday worship bulletins.

I believe that it was this process and our congregation's commitment to it—which are grounded in a belief that God's joy is infinite and intended for all—that makes it possible for Stephanie and me to be among you today.

⁴ <http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.htm>

I also believe that it is our Cabinet members' belief in God's abundant joy and desire to share this joy with all that they chose to stand in support of me, some three years ago, when I told them that I had agreed to help a lesbian couple prepare for and celebrate their wedding at Eden Church.

V

The author of John's gospel tells the story like this: on the third day, there was a wedding at Cana for some friends of Jesus' family. Mary, his mother went ahead to help prepare for the banquet. Jesus and his disciples were in attendance as guests.

After the wedding, when the wine supply had run out, Mary went to Jesus and informed him of the problem and asked for help. He said that it wasn't his time. Mary was undaunted by his dismissal. She remained confident that he could work a miracle, and told the servants to do whatever Jesus instructed.

Jesus told the servants to fill with water the stone jars that had been reserved for the rite of purification. They did as he requested and filled them to the brim—all 150 gallons. Then Jesus said to the servants, draw some out and take it to the sommelier.

Now the sommelier had not been told that the wine had run out, or that ritual purification jars were being used. So he drank unwittingly from the tasting vessel expecting a wine something along the lines of a Charles Shaw, but instead savored a vintage more like Dom Perignon. With excitement and surprise in his heart, the sommelier ran to the bridegroom and exclaimed in amazement, "Wow, hosts normally serve the good wine first, and then the inferior after the guests are plastered. But you have kept the good wine until now."

According to John, this was the first of Jesus' signs, through which God's glory was revealed, and his followers believed.

Skeptics and literalists alike need to know that John never intended for his audiences to quibble over historical facts, or spend hours probing the scientific nature of miracles. John did, however, intend for us to be inspired by this story and to learn from it that God's joy is infinite and it is offered for all.

Whenever we encounter persons who share a deep and abiding belief in the abundance of divine joy, God is glorified and our faith is strengthened. Whenever we dare to believe that there is yet more wedding wine for us—even long after others have drunk their fill and the supply seems depleted—God is glorified, and our faith is strengthened. Whenever we trust and live out of a deep belief that God's guest list is universal, God is glorified, and more and more people come to know, love, and serve our miraculous God.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: God's joy is infinite and it is offered for us and for all. Let us drink deeply of this good news. Amen.