

Breakdown and Breakthrough: Drinking the Wine of the Third Day

If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

-- Rilke

Imagine for a moment that you are somewhere away from home -- maybe on a trip somewhere -- a vacation perhaps, or at some conference you are attending. Imagine, too, that you are with a group of new friends -- people to whom you are naturally drawn, people who share some common interests with you. The conversation turns to spiritual questions -- where do you go for spiritual support, encouragement, guidance. You discover that none of these people are Christians; in fact, they hardly know anything about Jesus. They ask you about your spiritual life and when you mention Jesus they want to know who this Jesus was. What do you tell them? How would you start telling them the story of Jesus?

[possible answers -- begin with his birth -- begin with prophecies about Messiah -- begin with his death]

The setting we have just imagined is very much like the setting in which the Gospels were written. -- to answer this question. Who was this Jesus? It was an important question both for those who knew nothing about Jesus, and for those who did know about Jesus and who wanted to embody their particular understanding of who Jesus was in story form.

Today's Gospel reading is taken from the early part of the Gospel of John -- the second chapter. So --in chapter one, how did John start telling his story of Jesus?

[answer -- In the beginning was the Word -- and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us]

From the very start, John paints a big picture of who Jesus was -- a very big picture. Jesus is

the Word of God

the Word become flesh

God's only Son who made God known and

the One who gave us power to become children of God

and through a particular context -- the ministry of John the Baptist who was calling the Jewish people to repent -- to make a big change in their lives -- and return to the fundamentals of their ancient faith. For John the Baptist,

Jesus is.....

the Lamb of God

the Messiah.

A very big picture indeed!

The very next thing we come to in reading the Gospel of John is the story of the wedding in Cana that is our Gospel lesson for today.

For just a moment, return to that imaginary place where you are telling some new friends about who Jesus was. Who would put this story of Jesus changing water into wine right up front in the conversation?

[response -- nobody, or maybe a poet or storyteller might]

Maybe the writer of the Gospel, whom we call John, was a poet, or a storyteller -- someone whose stories have deeper layers of meaning and ways of working on us that may surprise us, or catch us a little off guard.

Surely this story of changing water into wine is not what we would expect to hear next following this grand and glorious introduction about Word becoming flesh, about Son of God, about Messiah. After all that build up, what do we get? A story about a wedding at which the wine has run out and Jesus does his first miracle and provides enough wine to finish the party. And, as the story tells us, he does it because his mother tells him to.

I can just hear Jesus saying, "MOTHER!! I did not come here to change water into wine. give me a break! This is not the grand entrance into ministry I had in mind!" But she just gets this smug smile on her face, turns to the servants, and says simply, "Do whatever he tells you."

And then, I can just hear Jesus saying under his breath, "OK, you want wine, I'll give you some wine. You see those six huge jars over there? Fill them up with water, all the way to the brim!" And you know the rest of the story -- which ends with the words, "Jesus did this the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory."

It would be easy to just pass by this little story and rush on to the unfolding drama that lies ahead. But that would be to miss some precious and beautiful things -- some key themes of Jesus' ministry that will wend their way through the rest of the Gospel.

In this little story we have the first clue as to how Jesus reveals his glory. It is not to be revealed in some high drama -- leaping off the temple and being caught by angels, for example. No, rather his glory is revealed in the ordinary fabric of life, right in the midst of the troubles of the world. Jesus doesn't come and reveal his glory by rearranging things from the top down -- this is not a story of regime change that comes by an exercise of power over. Jesus reveals his glory by infiltrating into the existing world, in places where we might not expect it, and in a quiet way that may almost go unnoticed -- things change around him; something they change big.

As at this wedding in Cana. Weddings back then, as in some cultures even today, lasted a long time -- often a full week, seven days. To run out of wine on only day 3 was a disgrace that would haunt the new couple and their families for a lifetime. So on this day Jesus saved the whole deal for this family, for this little village. This was a moment of crisis for this little community of Cana. They ran out of wine at a wedding. It is a crisis at the level of the small world of this story, but it points to an even bigger crisis in the larger world -- and in our world today. Do you ever feel as though you have run out of wine? That we have run out of wine? Or that the party is over, and nothing can possibly change that fact?

What would happen if, in the midst of all that is going wrong, all the breakdowns within us and all around us, if Jesus came and brought us wine, at least a taste. In this little "innocent" story at the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus (to use words borrowed from the poet Martin Espada) "breaks through the boundaries of what we think is possible," and invites us into the realm of the "the unimaginable, the unthinkable, the impossible."

So already in this little story, we are learning that Jesus has come to reveal his glory in the ordinary, mundane, day-to-day life of the world. We have learned that in the midst of all that is breaking down, he brings amazing new possibilities into being. There is one more clue in this little story as to the meaning that will unfold as the rest of the story is told. On what day did this miracle occur?

[answer: the third day]

Yes, it all happens on the third day. And what other important event happens on the third day? Yes, Jesus rises from the dead on the third day. Following those preceding days of terror and anguish, of serious breakdown of all that seemed so promising, on that biggest of all third days, the miracle of resurrection took place. So at that wedding in Cana a miracle happened, water changed to wine, the party could go on, unforeseen possibilities emerged. But looking ahead to the resurrection we see a deeper level of miracle, of transformation, that awaits us, even more unimaginable possibilities are hidden there. What if the real miracle is about our transformation -- about not just any wine, but third day wine? What would happen if Jesus came and turned us into that wine?

This past September Cheryl and I were at a program in the Tetons in Wyoming led by Bill Plotkin, the guide to nature and the human soul whose work we have been studying. At one of the sessions where 20 or so of us were gathered in a circle to share what was happening to us in our wanderings in the meadows, riversides, and forests of the Teton foothills and in our inner landscapes as well, Bill invited anyone to share, but particularly, as he put it, share if you have had either a breakdown or a breakthrough. Either a breakdown or a breakthrough. Now, Bill is someone who is utterly interested in transformation, about real, deep down, thoroughgoing change in

a person. Incidentally, I would say that was very much what Jesus was about, and is about, and is what this morning's Gospel lesson is about, too.

So Bill invited anyone to speak who had had a breakdown or a breakthrough, precisely because this is the context where deep down, thoroughgoing change happens. As I listened to what people shared that day, I was struck that these two similar words -- breakdown and breakthrough -- were related by more than just beginning with the same few letters of the alphabet.

In my own ponderings about breakdown and breakthrough I found something that I heard on the radio program, "On Being," last Sunday helpful. The program host, Krista Tippett interviewed a woman named Joan Halifax, a medical anthropologist and Zen teacher from New Mexico. She said that we are in an era of great breakdowns, environmentally and socially and psychologically. She referred to it as a fascinating breakdown. Well, I don't know about you -- I've had a few breakdowns in my life, but I'm not sure I would have used the word "fascinating" to describe them! But at my next breakdown I'm going to be on the lookout for the fascination! Her point, though, was that when complex systems break down the parts that have resilience to repair themselves move to a greater level of organization that is called "robustness." So, she says, we can anticipate moving to a time of great robustness. That is fascinating! From breakdown to breakthrough!

Look around. Where is the wine running out? Where things are breaking down in your life or in your community? What is Jesus up to in the ordinary, the mundane places in our lives? He may already be turning some water into wine. And it may only be the kind of wine that lets the party go on, which may be good enough. But it might also be the third day wine of transformation-- the wine that changes the whole party -- you, me, everyone there. We might be wise to stay with the breakdown, the grief, long enough to discover some new unimagined possibility, a deeper miracle of transformation.

There is a story that beautifully illustrates the deeper transformation inherent in our Gospel lesson, as well it might, since the author incorporated the Gospel lesson into the story. The story comes from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brother's Karamazov*. It is a moment of life transformation for the major character in the novel, Alyosha.

Alyosha is the youngest of the three brothers. The oldest, Dmitri, is something of an earthy, man-about-town, guy. The middle brother, Ivan, is an intellectual, aloof and an atheist. Alyosha, the hero of the novel, is a likable, gentle soul who is a novice in a Russian Orthodox monastery guided by his Elder, Father Zossima, who is highly regarded by everyone in the village as a prophet and healer. A good way into this long novel, old Father Zossima dies. There was a superstition in Russian towns back in these times that the bodies of truly holy men do not putrefy after death. After Father Zossima dies, he is laid in a coffin in the little hermitage, and what happens?

Almost right away, the body begins to smell. The stench gets worse. They have to open the windows. Alyosha is devastated, deeply grieving both the loss of his friend and teacher, and the disgrace of this putrefaction.

Dostoevsky begins a chapter which is entitled, *Cana of Galilee*, in this way:

It was very late, according to the monastery rules, when Alyosha returned to the hermitage; the door-keeper let him in by a special entrance. It had struck nine o'clock—the hour of rest and repose after a day of such agitation for all. Alyosha timidly opened the door and went into the elder's cell where his coffin was now standing. There was no one in the cell but Father Païssy, reading the Gospel in solitude over the coffin, and the young novice Porfiry, who, exhausted by the previous night's conversation and the disturbing incidents of the day, was sleeping the deep sound sleep of youth on the floor of the other room. Though Father Païssy heard Alyosha come in, he did not even look in his direction. Alyosha turned to the right from the door to the corner, fell on his knees and began to pray.

His soul was overflowing but with mingled feelings; no single sensation stood out distinctly; on the contrary, one drove out another in a slow, continual rotation. But there was a sweetness in his heart and, strange to say, Alyosha was not surprised at it. Again he saw that coffin before him, the hidden dead figure so precious to him, but the weeping and poignant grief of the morning was no longer aching in his soul.... [As Alyosha was praying,] He began listening to what Father Païssy was reading, but worn out with exhaustion he gradually began to doze.

“And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee;” read Father Païssy. “And the mother of Jesus was there; And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage.”

“And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine” ... Alyosha heard.

“Ah, yes, I was missing that, and I didn't want to miss it, I love that passage: it's Cana of Galilee, the first miracle.... Ah, that miracle! Ah, that sweet miracle! It was not men's grief, but their joy Christ visited, He worked His first miracle to help men's gladness.... ‘He who loves men loves their gladness, too’ ... He was always repeating that, it was one of his leading ideas.... ‘Everything that is true and good is always full of forgiveness,’ he used to say that, too” ...

“Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what has it to do with thee or me? Mine hour is not yet come. “His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it” ...

“Do it.... Gladness, the gladness of some poor, very poor, people.... Of course they were poor, since they hadn't wine enough even at a wedding.... Ah, he is reading again”....

“Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim.

“And he saith unto them, Draw out now and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it.

“When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was; (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom,

“And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, that which is worse; but thou hast kept the good wine until now.

In the midst of the reading, dozing off again, Alyosha finds himself at a marriage feast and suddenly there is Father Zossima coming toward him, he, the little, thin old man, with tiny wrinkles on his face, joyful and laughing softly.

“We are rejoicing,” the little, thin old man went on. “We are drinking the new wine, the wine of new, great gladness; do you see how many guests? Here are the bride and bridegroom, here is the wise governor of the feast, he is tasting the new wine. Why do you wonder at me? I gave an onion to a beggar, so I, too, am here. And many here have given only an onion each—only one little onion.... What are all our deeds? And you, my gentle one, you, my kind boy, you too have known how to give a famished woman an onion to-day. Begin your work, dear one, begin it, gentle one!... Do you see our Sun, do you see Him?”

“I am afraid ... I dare not look,” whispered Alyosha.

“Do not fear Him. He is terrible in His greatness, awful in His sublimity, but infinitely merciful. He has made Himself like unto us from love and rejoices with us. He is changing the water into wine that the gladness of the guests may not be cut short. He is expecting new guests, He is calling new ones unceasingly for ever and ever.... There they are bringing new wine. Do you see they are bringing the vessels....”

Something glowed in Alyosha's heart, something filled it till it ached, tears of rapture rose from his soul.... He stretched out his hands, uttered a cry and waked up.

Again the coffin, the open window, and the soft, solemn, distinct reading of the Gospel. But Alyosha did not listen to the reading

Alyosha finds himself standing and goes out of the cell without stopping at the coffin.

He did not stop on the steps either, but went quickly down; his soul, overflowing with rapture, yearned for freedom, space, openness. The vault of heaven, full of soft, shining stars, stretched vast and fathomless above him. The Milky Way ran in two pale streams

from the zenith to the horizon. The fresh, motionless, still night enfolded the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the cathedral gleamed out against the sapphire sky. The gorgeous autumn flowers, in the beds round the house, were slumbering till morning. The silence of earth seemed to melt into the silence of the heavens. The mystery of earth was one with the mystery of the stars....

Alyosha stood, gazed, and suddenly threw himself down on the earth. He did not know why he embraced it. He could not have told why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss it all. But he kissed it weeping, sobbing and watering it with his tears, and vowed passionately to love it, to love it for ever and ever. "Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears," echoed in his soul.

What was he weeping over?

Oh! in his rapture he was weeping even over those stars, which were shining to him from the abyss of space, and "he was not ashamed of that ecstasy." There seemed to be threads from all those innumerable worlds of God, linking his soul to them, and it was trembling all over "in contact with other worlds." He longed to forgive every one and for everything, and to beg forgiveness. Oh, not for himself, but for all men, for all and for everything. "And others are praying for me too," echoed again in his soul. But with every instant he felt clearly and, as it were, tangibly, that something firm and unshakable as that vault of heaven had entered into his soul. It was as though some idea had seized the sovereignty of his mind—and it was for all his life and for ever and ever. He had fallen on the earth a weak boy, but he rose up a resolute champion, and he knew and felt it suddenly at the very moment of his ecstasy. And never, never, all his life long, could Alyosha forget that minute.

"Some one visited my soul in that hour," he used to say afterwards, with implicit faith in his words.

Within three days he left the monastery in accordance with the words of his elder, who had bidden him "sojourn in the world."

Three days later Alyosha left the monastery to "sojourn in the world." In the midst of great loss and grief, Alyosha had tasted of the wine of the third day and emerged full of a robustness and resilience that would stay with him all his life long.

In the midst of our ordinary lives, especially when things break down, Jesus shows up. A miracle awaits. Unimaginable possibilities await. At the end of the day, it is we, ourselves, that may be transformed -- we, ourselves that turn into wine.

In the poet Rilke's words, "If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine."

Here is whole poem:

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent Earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

Prayer:

God grant that when we experience the grief of the breakdown, we also receive the gift of the breakthrough. Give us the place to pour out our tears whenever things fall apart. In that place of loss and grief, grant us the miracle of third day wine. Change us again and again from the inside out, until finally, one day, we are all gathered in beloved community together, in a beautiful wedding feast, one day.

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