

Last week I shared with you a very personal story of family that has stuck with me for many years. Today I would like to share a family memory that goes back even further. I remember its details to this day not because it was painful, like last week's but the exact opposite.

It was a gorgeous early summer day. The sun was shining brightly through the stunningly vibrant green of the worn down Appalachian hills in front of us. We were traveling a quiet country road I had never experienced before, my mom and dad in the front seat and all four of us children stacked together like sardines in the back of our 1962 Rambler station wagon. It was such a cool car, because not only did we get to see the lovely green scenery out the windows, but we could also view the asphalt below by peaking through the holes in the chassis directly under us.

We had not seen another vehicle for quite a while by East coast standards, perhaps 15 minutes. But as we turned the bend, we saw a discolored step van on the opposite side of the highway, sitting on the side of the road. As we got closer, I could barely make out the faded letters on the side of the truck, Martinsburg Dry Cleaning. At that moment I heard my dad say, "I wonder if by some wild chance that could be..."

We had no idea what he was talking about as he slowed down the vehicle and came to a complete stop on the opposite side of the highway, directly across from the mysterious truck. My dad looked intently over at the man sitting behind the wheel, so all of us did the same thing. Since there was no door on the truck, we were able to see the entire figure of a relatively tall, lean man with a red face and thin strawberry blonde hair, fast asleep. My dad said, "Well, I'll be." I sat there transfixed as I watched my father's eyes suddenly light up like a kid at Christmas. He then very quietly opened our squeaky car door, got up and closed it behind him as gently as possible. I could not believe it as I watched my dad tiptoe across that highway until he was standing inches away from the sleeping man. He then yelled at the top of his lungs, "HEY, HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO GET ANY WORK DONE LIKE THIS!" The sleeping giant bolted up so high and so quickly that his head hit the top of the truck. He then leaped out of the vehicle, grabbed my dad around the waist and lifted him two feet off the ground, squeezing him as hard as he could. As we all wondered whether our father was going to survive, the two then walked back across the highway with their arms over each others shoulders. "Betty Lou!, how are you?", this guy says to my mother. No one before or since had every called my mother Betty Lou.

Then he greeted each one of us as if he had known us his entire life.

Moments later, this weirdly jovial guy took us down the road to a general store. We walked in, whereupon he greeted the person behind the counter, a guy he had never met before in his life, the same way he had just greeted us. "Harry, how the heck are you? Is this a great day or what?" "Hey, do you have any of the honeymooners food today?" The counter guy looked at him like he had been dropped from another planet. "You know," he continued. "The honeymooners food. Lettuce. Lettuce alone." Then he broke out into guffaws of laughter. "Look at these kids!", he went on. "Are they great or what? I want you to get them all the best sodas in the place! Then let them pick whatever they want over here!"

That was our introduction to my dad's Uncle Herb. He was the incarnated definition of over the top. Everything he did was saturated with joy and exuberance. And everything he did was also extravagant and gigantic. That day was the first time in my life that I got to drink an entire bottle of soda by myself. It was the first time I ate a whole tastycake pie by myself. That is the way my Uncle Herb rolled, everything with vigor and with abundance. After that day, we went to visit my Uncle Herb, Aunt Rita and Aunt Burdette on a regular basis. Here's how that day would always go.

We would arrive at 11:30 AM. After 30 minutes of being greeted like royalty and listening to Uncle Herb's ridiculously corny jokes, we would sit down to the biggest meal I have ever seen to this day. We would talk and eat and laugh for hours. Finally, we would stop and take a break for an hour and a half, retiring to the tiny living room and hearing more jokes. Then we would gather back in the kitchen for a smaller meal, this time with only five or six courses instead of ten.

There are many people that wonder why Jesus would choose as the very first sign of his ministry, to turn a ridiculous amount of water into wine at a wedding, to bring forth so much wine that those gathered could not possibly drink it in a week of partying. I am not one of those people. I have experienced over the top abundance before, and it is to this day the most joyful moments of my life.

Why are we uncomfortable with an over the top Jesus? Because like the Pharisees, who will later refer to Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard, we have been taught that it is Godly to be thrifty, prudent, and un wasteful. But today, Jesus points out something else. The glory of God's realm occurs when people experience abundance. Before that day of my first encounter with my Uncle Herb, never had I ever had more than enough of anything.

We had no money for anything beyond essentials. And in the midst of that, this guy walked in and bought me a whole soda. I remember every moment of that day all these years later because it changed me. It taught me that life can be more than getting by. It showed me what the joy of God's presence really meant.

Beloved, what Jesus does today is not trivial. It changed people's lives. What he does is tell every person at that wedding celebration that they can have a whole soda. He shows them joy and happiness and that their lives can be more than just figuring out a way to survive. The life that they are living is not the life that God imagines for them, he says by today's act. Later in this Gospel, he will state in words what today is all about. "I came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

In addition to our uncomfortableness with a God who would perform a miracle of excess, we are also troubled with the idea that maybe Jesus is condoning alcoholism. But that is a transference of today's Gospel into our time and culture. We are the ones who live in the world of anxiety and stress that leads to alcohol abuse. Such was not the issue at hand for hard working people in the first century Mediterranean, where life struggles were more about dealing with constant back breaking labor so that they could

survive.

Today's miracle is also misread when we hear it in our historical context of over-consumption. There is a big difference between buying crap you don't need as a form of entertainment and the over the top abundance that Jesus brings today. If Jesus had been condoning that kind of excess, this miracle would have been performed at the wedding of a well-to-do aristocratic Roman official. But instead, it happens among his mother's family and friends, the same people who we have already learned are dirt poor. The over abundance of wine today is about bringing joy, abundance and happiness to people who rarely or ever had that experience. It is a symbol of the economic reversal Jesus has in mind for the world, a symbol of a new society where all those suffering suddenly have dignity and full life. Yes, this is about a reckless, extravagant party for people who have never had a whole can of soda in their entire lives.

Of course, what Jesus and his mother are saying through this miracle is also not just about how things must change in first century Middle Eastern society. The underlying symbol in this event is Eucharist. Remember that there is no Last Supper story in the Gospel of John. He symbolizes Eucharist through two stories, today's covering the wine, and one that

occurs a few chapters later covering the bread and the fish. It is not a coincidence that the story of the feeding of the 5000 is also about abundance and people having so much to eat that twelve baskets of leftover food are there after they have gorged themselves for hours. The Eucharist in the Gospel of John is just like going to my Aunt Rita and Uncle Herb's house for lunch and dinner and lunch and dinner and lunch and dinner. It is about people with nothing suddenly having everything and about the joy and exuberance that occurs as a result. That is what it is supposed to mean when we share bread and wine here together and that is why we have tied our once a month Agape meal to communion. This is about all of us living in abundance with one another, and then bringing that abundance to the rest of the world. Eucharist in the Gospel of John is all about commissioning each of us to be Uncle Herb to the world, bringing everyone we meet so much joy and happiness that they laugh out loud and so much food and drink that they are totally content. Despite what our puritanical ancestors told us, the first sign of the realm of God is not frugality or a life of constant self-denial, but instead a party!

Another argument made by commentators is that today's miracle seems a frivolous way for Jesus to begin his ministry. Should we not expect

a little more from the son of God than a cheap party trick? After all, turning water into wine is the kind of thing that other gods did. In fact, the Greek god Dionysus was already pretty famous for doing this exact same thing. Why would Jesus stoop to this level, especially for his opening act?

What those who see it this way miss in my mind is the broad distance between the social structure of the first century world and now. Today, if people run out of food or liquor at a wedding, the party slows down and everyone goes home. But if someone ran out of food or wine then, it was a shameful disgrace. What it told others was that not only were you in economic straits, but you also didn't have any friends. Friends made sure that no one in their circle ever ran out of anything at a wedding. By providing wine today, Jesus is not just allowing for more celebration, (which in my mind is reason enough), but he is also protecting the honor of the families of the bride and groom. And as we have discussed previously, honor was everything in the first century Mediterranean. What Jesus does is make it possible for these two families to show their face in public again. He gives them back their dignity.

It is in this light that today's Gospel also merges with the theology of the person we honor tomorrow. The legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr. is all about creating a world in which every single person can live in the dignity that Jesus provides the wedding couple today, where everyone is held in a position of honor, where never again will we judge someone by the color of their skin or their religious convictions or their sexual orientation. From this day on, Jesus will spend the rest of his life bringing honor to everyone in his society who had been dishonored, women, the poor, Gentiles. Dr. King did the exact same thing with his life.

When we understand that the miracle of today is so far beyond a cheap party trick, and we begin to see the gigantic significance of the act of Jesus turning water into wine, we realize that what he did today calls for a response on our part. Like Jesus, like Dr. King, we need to begin by assessing our own societal woes and identifying everyone around us who have had their honor taken away. Then we too need to restore it. We need to shift the argument away from purity and back to honor. We need to stop judging and start caring. We need to live into that Baptismal Covenant we stated last week, and bring dignity to every single human being.

There are no greater examples of how we can do that than Jesus and Dr. King. But if those heights seem too lofty for you, I ask you to consider that what they did is in reach of every single one of us. YOU have the power

to effect this change in the world. I know that is true because I have seen it with my own eyes. According to the world in which they lived, my Uncle Herb and Aunt Rita had nothing. They were poor as dirt West Virginia hillbillies. They had no authority and no power. But on the day of my Uncle Herb's funeral, there were so many people there that they filled every space of the building and poured out into the parking lot and out onto the main street of Martinsburg. Traffic had to be stopped. Every single person there had a story. They talked about how my great Uncle had brought them out of despair when they were beyond depressed. They told stories of one gigantic meal after another, about being befriended by this guy they had never seen before. They told tales of constant laughter and celebration and one abundant life giving event after another. They talked about how Herbie had given them their life back and made them feel whole again by giving them a pie and then a bushel of roasting ears, and then a ham and then a cake and then a green bean casserole, all the time making them laugh until they could laugh no more.

He had nothing but somehow he gave everyone everything, so much of everything that you always had to say, STOP! No more! Beloved, if little ol' Herbie could do it, we can all do it. All of us are capable of miracles. All

of us can turn water into wine, so much wine that we can distribute it to the whole world, so much wine that the party can go on all night and into tomorrow.

So let us go forth and make miracles. Let us bring constant abundance to a world that lives in scarcity and let us bring joy and laughter where there is none. That is what will heal us. That is what will bring about the realm of God. Party on! Amen.