

I marvel at the tasting notes that you find on some wine bottles! You know, this sort of thing: "Ripe plum and berry fruit are plentiful with pepper and spice fragrances combined with subtle vanilla and liquorices fruit flavors, supported by chocolate oak influences, this is a typically rich and generous wine." Maybe I get a hint of one of these flavors but not all of them. Back in 2002 a doctoral dissertation entitled "Taste: A Study in the Representation of Chemical Substances in the Arena of Consciousness" presented the findings of a researcher Fredric Brochet who proved that most of what connoisseurs say about wine is well – humbug! He did three things – he analyzed the written text of wine reviews, he carried out blind taste tests, he even scanned brains as people tasted wine and the result was – humbug! He did play some dirty tricks on his volunteers. In one tasting, he served a white wine and elicited all the usual descriptions: "fresh, dry, honeyed, lively." Later he served the same wine, this time dyed red: Out came the red terms: "intense, spicy, supple, deep." For proving that the comments of tasters are baloney, Brochet earned his doctorate! Currently he is banned from entering France and the Napa Valley, California!

Today's water into wine story is maybe a little easier for us to get our heads around that some of Jesus' other miracles, but it is still troubling. Our problem with this incident arises not because we are so modern and sophisticated and scientific but more because we tend to live careful, cautious, restrained lives. Most of us are not prone to make big moves; we prefer the step-by-step, cautious approach. Heck some of us get a bit antsy when we end up having to sit a few rows back from where we normally sit in church. Most of us don't go out and buy a new car or washing machine or computer on a whim – not till we have researched the choices online and consulted "Consumer Reports." One unfortunate by product of this sensible approach to living is we end up acting the same when it comes to matters of the faith, living in a timid manner we don't often ask big things of God. We hide or bury our faith; we keep our trust in the living God to ourselves. Sure, when we are here in church, when we are thinking godly thoughts, the part of our life that we think of as the "faith piece" is front and center but too often we are scarcely out of the church parking lot before other things crowd out what seemed so special just a few minutes previously. As a result our prayers get reduced, they are chastened, cautious, and careful – sure we maybe offer some prayers that are a tad more adventurous than our normal comfort level but certainly not awe-inspiring, life-altering, world-changing.

Whose wine is it anyway? People come to me, as to every pastor, and in their own form of words, they say, "I fear I'm losing my faith." They come asking what they can do to hold on to their faith, but this is to begin in the wrong place. Faith, our relationship with God is not a matter of what we feel, of what we believe, of what we do. And if it did we would quickly come face to face with our limits, if faith were all about us then we would be right to fear because on our own, we are sunk!

Whose wine is it anyway? It is God's wine, willed by God, made by God, given by God; that is what the story says. So, rather than us keep on running up to Trader Joes trying to get some four buck chuck to keep our faith going, better to discover or re-discover that true, real, lasting, growing faith, is never our achievement but always comes to us as a gift. Coming to us as a gift from God, a gift that God will not let run out, a gift that God will renew to meet every situation we face. Whose wine is it anyway? It is God's wine, not ours! Faith is a divine vintage, not a human invention or achievement.

We encounter God by accepting that God accepts us as we are in Jesus Christ. Sure God then wills us to change and grow and follow – but at the start and at every beginning again, God accepts us as we are in Jesus Christ. Thanks to our Lord and Savior, God's welcome for us is a gift beyond all

deserving! Jesus, and the wedding celebration with all the good townsfolk of Cana, is a parable of promise and abundance, encountering Jesus comes about when we realize that we cannot pull ourselves up to God but God wills to give us all that we need to be a faithful, fruitful, resourceful disciples.

Whose wine is it anyway? The record of the incident begins, “On the third day!” “On the third day....” Now, haven’t we heard that somewhere before? Usually when we hear a reference to “on the third day” we need to be ready for some BIG news! It may not have taken place around Easter, but this Wedding and Wine story is an Easter story. It is a story of abundance, a story of overflowing extravagance. In place of shortage, scarcity and emptiness, there is now overflowing abundance. Wherever and whenever we encounter Jesus, as Jesus encounters us, there is abundance, an abundance of love, an abundance of glory; when Jesus encounters us pain and hurt and death is swallowed up, life breaks in, life emerges, life triumphs, curtains are torn, stones are rolled away, tombs are emptied, the dead are raised, the good news is proclaimed, tables are set with bread and wine, feasts are shared. Whose wine is it anyway? It is God’s wine of a new life, with new hope and new love, enough for all.

Whose wine is it anyway? It is wine for the celebration – a celebration not only for the invited elite as is so often the case in wedding celebrations today, but a festival that included the whole town, not just the immediate family and a few special friends. The reputation not just of this family, but of the whole community was at stake, as the last of the vino evaporated in the afternoon sunshine! The actions of Jesus saved not just the reputation of one family; Jesus’ actions redeemed the whole town. Just imagine the headlines in the Judean Times, if the grateful citizens of Cana had not encountered Jesus: “Cana canned can’t carnival!”, “Cana: The Town that ran dry”, “Wine debacle mars Wedding Celebration”, “Sober Cana sobs!” or in the fine Rock Hill tradition of the Ebenezer Grill – Cana: Town loses “winer”!

Jesus’ intervention allowed the party to continue and to be all the more appreciated as this new wine was shared. This new wine tasted better than what had gone before! Compared to the paint thinner, “vino collapse” that everyone had been “enjoying” until it ran out, this latest wine, this new wine, this Jesus wine, was fully free and generous, this new wine had a real intensity – it was provided and received freely, it tasted magnificent and was shared with an overwhelming gratitude.

Whose wine is it anyway? The wine Jesus offers is the wine of the Kingdom of God that declares that, despite all the odds, in life and death we belong to God! In feast and famine, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow – we belong to God – now and always! Those jars now overflowing with new wine turn the focus not on what has ended but what has started anew. Our encounter with God in Jesus Christ, offers us the opportunity to live intoxicated with God’s Living Water, God’s New Wine. Living no longer for ourselves but for God and for others! Living not in fear but freely! To repeat a line you have heard me use previously - Living more simply, that others may simply live! Living not to avoid death, but to share life!

The promise of this new life and this new wine makes us very aware that God expects us to live changed lives, and living changed lives, to go on to change the world around us. It ought not be the only way to mark the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., but the holiday we mark tomorrow celebrates the life of one of God’s servants who tasted the new wine of deliverance and living a changed life, embracing peace and rejecting violence, seeking to bring our nation and our world, into line with God’s desire for justice and harmony and healing of the nations. Still today we have a call to live out

our call to forge a more perfect union as a nation and a yet more perfect union as the people of God. A more perfect union rooted in community and togetherness, in justice and peace, not out of some limited sense of political correctness, not even out of a call to tolerance but out of the fullest and most complete and overtly genuine desire rooted in the very life of God to live in true community, putting an end to all divisions.

Whose wine is it anyway? The words from Isaiah 62 we read today demonstrate the abundant joy and love that God has for God's people. The prophet was speaking a word of comfort to a hurting and desolate people, returning home after their exile in Babylon. The promise of a homecoming came with a new name from God, the assurance that all over again God was encountering them, welcoming them, restoring them, forgiving their past failures and granting them a new beginning.

Whose wine is it anyway? God's love is a scandal! Yes, God's love is a scandal, because God's love comes to good and bad alike, the wine of love and forgiveness is poured out for all of us equally, yet this is God's way – God loves all of us equally! God loves all of us equally – 110%!

Whose wine is it anyway? My friends, God is splashing wine on us, even now, as we launch into a new year and a new chapter of faithful living!

By what name will you be known in this New Year – faithful servant, returned wanderer, difficult disciple, willing helper?

By what name will our church be known: careless lover? Friend of the friendless? Blessed and gifted? Slow to care? People of Joy? Community of compassion? Devoted disciples?

Having heard the promise and tasted that God is good – let us resolve to continue the celebration of God's love in who we are and in all we do, sharing the fullness of the love that God has for the world in Jesus Christ, the giver and sharer of wine and bread and hope and love, for the world. Amen.