

“Water Into Wine”

April 29th, 2018
5th Sun. of Easter
Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

[Jesus said,]

“I am the vine, you are the branches. [Those who abide] in me, and I in [them],
... it is [they who bear] much fruit,
for apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5

Let us pray... O God,

Help us contend with the addictive influences that rob people of living full lives.

Enliven us with water and the Word, Bread & Cup, song & story.

Sustain us with the joy of Christian fellowship and service.

Amen

When was the last time you had an opportunity to strike up a conversation
with a stranger about anything – or nothing in particular?

Perhaps you are shy, and it would take something like getting stuck in an elevator,
or waiting for your car to be repaired at a garage

which would force you by necessity or boredom to talk to someone.

Negotiating a business contract or conferring with a new doctor

because it is a more professional way of communicating,

just might be easier for some of us by keeping it to ‘just the facts, ma’am’
or by having a level of confidentiality established at the outset.

Some people have no trouble at all meeting and talking with people, whether that is
shopping at a farmers’ market, making a ‘cold call’ as a salesperson,

interacting on a cruise, or just sitting at a café.

I believe it is a gift – as well as a skill that can be learned,

to be able to spontaneously engage people in conversation;

and certainly this was necessary for the early apostles...

The chance meeting between the Apostle Philip and the Ethiopian official
led to a conversion – but first, they had to have a conversation.

The Holy Spirit played a role, urging Philip in the first place to run up and catch
a chariot going down the road, and when he did, he recognized

that the passenger was reading aloud from the Book of Isaiah.

Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading,

and the Ethiopian answered him – with a question:

“How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?”

Then, he re-read the passage, and asked Phillip *another* question:

“So, was Isaiah talking about himself being persecuted or about someone else?”
and they are off and running about something to talk about.

Now, Philip was Jewish, so he could speak about this text in Isaiah

as being one of the songs of the suffering Servant,

but he was also an eyewitness to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection

so he could interpret Isaiah’s text in terms of Jesus’ persecution.

This Ethiopian was so moved by what he was hearing, he asked another question:

“Here’s some water. How about baptizing me?”

Willard, p.2

Spontaneous and joyful, this person responds to Philip's serendipitous question,
engaging him in a conversational Bible study,
and becoming a follower of Christ.

This was before 'Christians' were even invented yet, as a religious group.

They were still mostly Jewish, or simply called people 'belonging to the Way'
[Acts 9:2]

So, early Christianity was still taking shape, dynamic, enthused, and even... fun!

Evangelism for Christians of the United Church of Christ has had to evolve
and the 'God Is Still Speaking' initiative has been an important way to do this
like how we talk about our faith in terms of...

'Extravagant Welcome', 'Our faith is 2,000 years old, our thinking is not',
'No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you're welcome here'.

Still, even these new ways of talking about the Gospel,
need to be updated themselves, so the United Church of Christ
has started a new campaign:

"The Three Loves of The UCC – Neighbors, Children, & Creation".

Later this summer, we will learn more about this new initiative
as it has been proclaimed by the National Setting of our church,
and how it is being promoted by our Florida Conference.

The Rev. Dr. Jean Simpson has been charged with this task
and she will be here to share that message on June 24th.

Like the bold claim that "God Is Still Speaking",
the members of our denomination are being asked to claim
this new vision of the Gospel hope as our own.

Perhaps, it took you a while to get the idea behind "the Comma" –
"Don't put a period where God has placed a comma,
because God is still speaking".

It may have seemed just a little too cute – and even a bit heretical
as an alternative to the crown, cross, and orb
of the traditional UCC emblem.

But it caught on, and even became the subject for a conversation starter, like...
"Say, what does that 'comma' stand for?"

These days, it is almost quaint, so we need a new look at our mission
to keep our own enthusiasm vital and alive.

As we seek to do that, we maintain our connection with 'the Vine' –
which is a way of thinking about Christ who warned his disciples that
they needed to stay connected to him, when he said,
'*apart from me you can do nothing*' [John 15:5^b]

Willard, p.3

The Holy Spirit is that active part of God that has continued to inform and inspire the people of God with truth and love.

It is not too big a stretch to make a connection between the fruit of the vine with the fruit of the Spirit.

The joy of the Spirit can be intoxicating,
but it is not something we can bring up at will or hold onto.

It comes as a gift – the Spirit comes and goes where it chooses.

However, there is plenty we can do to prepare to receive it.

Wine is a metaphor for the joy of life and has its place in Christian tradition.

Wine is made by crushing the grapes and storing the juice
so that the fermenting process can take place.

So, the wine-making process – like spiritual growth, is not easy.

Wine-making requires discipline like spiritual formation,
but the analogy can only go so far.

Wine is *theologically* part of Holy Communion and represents
both Jesus' sacrificial death and his triumph of resurrection over death.

From time to time, the Diaconate has considered the question
some of you have posed,

“So, why is it again that don't we serve wine at communion?”

The rationale has generally been not to tempt any of us with addiction.

Wine's quality to intoxicate can compel any of us to excess.

It is ironic that – despite wine's significance for the joy of life and
as an element of our sacred tradition of communion,
wine is harmful to people when used to excess.

The same is true about bread – another element of communion.

Too much bread – or carbohydrates, can be a problem in their excess
for people with diabetes or just weightwatchers.

Bread is not addictive, but something we can't easily do without in this society.

There are other elements from other faith traditions
that have a sacramental role, but in excess can be harmful.

Tobacco is ritually smoked by Native Americans as a thank offering,
but it is also addictive and can lead to life-threatening health conditions
when smoked recreationally to excess.

Peyote harvested from a cactus is used ritually by Native people of the Southwest
to induce visions, but is a hallucinogenic drug that can be addictive.

The dangers of drug addiction – specifically the abuse of opioids,
has been described as a serious epidemic for many communities in our society.

So, even good things taken in excess can become bad things.

There really is only one thing that *can and should* be done to excess –
which teaches us at the same time how enough can be enough...

Willard, p.4

In the wine-making process these days, water is added

to lower the alcoholic content and limit the dangers that come from excess –

This even improves the taste of such wines – which are still no less addictive.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/27/food/fo-wine27>

Water – like wine, has a spiritual significance, with creative & destructive potential.

It is the source of life and the means for maintaining life,

but it has the power to carve canyons and destroy neighborhoods.

It can be used to cleanse things, places, and people.

In Christian baptism,

it is all of that in its significance.

The waters of baptism represent the watery chaos of Creation,

the amniotic waters of birth, the floods that bore up Noah and Moses.

It is also the life-saving drink that sustained Hagar and her son Ishmael

in the desert.

It is by the waters of baptism that a person is cleansed of one's sin,

to emerge as a new creation.

You would think that adding the waters of baptism would make Christians

less dangerous than other people as a result, but there is no guarantee of that.

Though we only need to be baptized once, according to Christian tradition,

the potential for sinful behavior does not go away.

So, how do we know when enough is enough?

Martin Luther – the 16th Century CE reformer, may have an insight for us:

Luther said he 'baptized' himself every morning when he washed up!

I suppose that is like what a friend of mine said to me once:

"Though I am a married man, I have fallen in love many times...

with the same woman" – he meant his wife.

What we receive with baptism, is a relationship.

We can forget and fall away or disregard what was done for us,

but that relationship continues.

We are marked by the tattooing of water – it is a watermark that God can see,

and it is God who remembers and who nudges us from time to time

to awaken and enliven us.

If we are to get anything out of that relationship, though,

we must recommit ourselves on a regular basis – and stay connected "on Vine".

We must work at falling in love with God through Christ, again and again,

beyond the initial courtship of baptism,

whether that was by cool waters or by fiery Holy Spirit.

As we go along in life, we can and should be intoxicated with enthusiasm –

literally to be "in God" through the love of Christ and the love for others,

especially the next generation and the world we live on.

Willard, p.5

Wine is a metaphor for the joy of life and has its place in Christian tradition.

Wine is made by crushing the grapes and storing the juice
so that the fermenting process can take place.

So, the wine-making process – like spiritual growth, is not easy.

Wine-making requires discipline like spiritual formation.

Water is added into the fermenting process in an effort to limit
the risks of excess and to emphasize taste.

As we experience the living out of our faith,
as we ‘taste and see that the LORD is good’ [Psalm 34:8],
that ... is part of the witness... we have to share.

We are renewed
by renewing our baptismal commitment *in our hearts.*

We are renewed
by participating in the life of congregational fellowship and of the Bread & Cup.

We are renewed
by the Word we hear and read and sing,

We are renewed
by the love we show to those around us
and those beyond the walls of this church
whom we happen to meet along the Way...

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good ol’ Way;
And who shall wear the starry crown. Good Lord, show me the Way.*

*O sisters, let’s go down. Let’s go down. Come on down.
O sisters, let’s go down. Down in the river to pray.*

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good ol’ Way;
And who shall wear the robe and crown. Good Lord, show me the Way.*

*O brothers, let’s go down. Let’s go down. Come on down.
O brothers, let’s go down. Down in the river to pray.*

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good ol’ Way;
And who shall wear the starry crown. Good Lord, show me the Way.*

*O sinners, let’s go down. Let’s go down. Come on down.
O sinners, let’s go down. Down in the river to pray.*

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good ol’ Way;
And who shall wear the robe and crown. Good Lord, show me the Way.*

Amen

*Our lesson from Acts 8:26-40 – as it is found in the Contemporary English Version,
describes an encounter between the Apostle Philip
and a dignitary from Ethiopia.*

About three hundred years later,

Christianity would be accepted as the national religion of Ethiopia...

²⁶ The Lord's angel said to Philip,

“Go south along the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

²⁷ So Philip left.

An important Ethiopian official happened to be going along that road
in his chariot.

He was the chief treasurer for Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia.

The official had gone to Jerusalem to worship

²⁸ and was now on his way home.

He was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.

²⁹ The Spirit told Philip to catch up with the chariot.

³⁰ Philip ran up close and heard the man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah.

Philip asked him,

“Do you understand what you are reading?”

³¹ The official answered,

“How can I understand unless someone helps me?”

He then invited Philip to come up and sit beside him.

³² The man was reading the passage that said,

“He was led like a sheep on its way to be killed.

He was silent as a lamb whose wool is being cut off,
and he did not say a word.

³³ He was treated like a nobody and did not receive a fair trial.

How can he have children, if his life is snatched away?”

³⁴ The official said to Philip,

“Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or about someone else?”

³⁵ So Philip began at this place in the Scriptures

and explained the good news about Jesus.

³⁶⁻³⁷ As they were going along the road,

they came to a place where there was some water. The official said,

“Look! Here is some water. Why can't I be baptized?”

³⁸ He ordered the chariot to stop.

Then they both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

³⁹ After they had come out of the water, the Lord's Spirit took Philip away.

The official never saw him again, but he was very happy as he went on his way.

⁴⁰ Philip later appeared in Azotus[Ah-zo'-tus].

He went from town to town, all the way to Caesarea, telling people about Jesus.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 15:1-8

[Jesus said,]

¹“I am the true vine,

and my [Abba] Father is the vinedresser.

² Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, [God] takes away,

and every branch that does bear fruit [God] prunes,

that it may bear more fruit.

³ You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you.

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you.

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you, unless you abide in me.

⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches.

[Those who abide] in me, and I in [them], ...it is [they who bear] much fruit,

for apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶ If [someone] does not abide in me, [they are] cast forth as a branch and [wither];

and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,

ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.

⁸ By this my [Abba] Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit,

and so prove to be my disciples.