OPEN, THIRSTY AND EMPTY - READY TO RECEIVE

Today’s gospel story -- the Wedding Feast at Cana -- was a favorite subject for painters in earlier times. Medieval paintings sometimes show Jesus at Cana, surrounded by guests, his hand outstretched, hovering over six stone jars like a magician preparing for a trick. Six jars once empty, now brimming with good wine. Six jars, once empty, were now filled. And yet, when you look at various paintings of this miracle, when you really look at them, and then re-read the gospel story, you realize that in most scenes there is a glaring mistake. Those jars are just too small.

Six stone jars hidden in a corner, or tucked away under a table. Six stone jars, barely reaching to the top of his couch, scarcely filling the space in an open door. Six jars, pictured as too short, too narrow, too fragile to hold this tidal wave of new wine. Do the math yourself: six stone jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons, according to John’s story. What would that look like? Well, when poured out, there would be 1800 half-liter bottles of wine, or 3,600 glasses. If there were about a hundred guests (which would be normal for a wedding feast in Jesus’ day), each guest would get about… eighteen bottles apiece.

Now I’ve been to a lot of weddings and wedding anniversaries (many of them with members of our parish), and we drank a lot of wine at those parties, but… eighteen bottles apiece. Either the gospel writer John is being ridiculous and pulling our leg, or he has a powerful and significant message about God and Jesus that he wants to convey… and wants us to drink in. Our eyes skim over the numbers in this story as if they are mere filler, an intriguing detail added to keep our interest or make the story come alive. Our familiarity numbs us to the fact that at this wedding feast, no one, absolutely no one, will go away thirsty. Isaiah says, “As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you.” This miracle poured out by the gallons is a sign— a concrete reminder of God’s delight in us.

It is a symbol of the covenant that binds us— a bond cemented not by guilt or by threats or by fear, but by the love that one newlywed holds out to the other. This miracle of the jars is an epiphany. A moment when God is revealed to us. And yet, those words of Jesus, “my time has not yet come” remind us that this epiphany— this gallon-by-gallon revelation of God’s overflowing presence— is simply one signpost along the way, God’s way of abundance. The transformation of water into wine, just like the healing of the lepers, and the raising of Lazarus, and the restoration of the bleeding woman is a marker that invites us to look beyond.

Like legends on a map or bearings on a compass, these miracles point us down the road and guide us along the way. On that journey, the true epiphany comes when we face the loss of dreams or the loss of friendship— when we battle human betrayal or physical pain, or the premature death of someone we loved; when we find ourselves alone, on our knees in despair looking up at the cross, and we remember… God wants
to make emptiness overflow. Gallon by gallon, jar by jar, God sends us miraculous signs everyday: a chance to start over -- forgiven, whenever we have sinned; a place at the table, fed, whenever we are hungry; a standing invitation to join the party, even when it appears as if the wine has run dry. The true epiphany comes when we realize that, like painters of the wedding at Cana, our jars are sometimes just too small. The true epiphany comes when we allow ourselves to be open enough, thirsty enough, empty enough to receive God’s tidal wave of new wine.

One question I’ve asked many parishioners after the New Year has been: “How was your Christmas vacation?” One mom said: “Gosh, it was great. My husband and I took the kids to the northwest and had a wonderful time just by ourselves – enjoying one another’s company, no pressure of time or commitments, just undistracted presence and attention to one another.” Then, with a sigh, she said: “Now it’s back to the grind.” And that grind is unfortunate, even if it’s inevitable. However, living from vacation to vacation, from holiday to holiday, in order to find some R&R, some break from routine, some space to spend quality time with those we love is no way to live. Nor do we have to. Each of us, no matter what our situation or state in life, no matter our job or family demands, no matter our physical problems or emotional stresses – each of us can find every day a “renewable source of energy.” Our Lord is waiting, eager to fill our empty jars with love and grace to overflowing. All we have to do is approach him and let him know what we need. Each of us needs a personal spirituality that is tailored to our life and lifestyle.

In her wonderful book, *My Monastery is a Minivan*, Dorothy Roy, a Bay area author, spiritual guide and mom, shares some of the entertaining and touching stories of her own family’s spiritual journey amid the noise and mess and clutter and chaos that are part of daily family life. In one essay she writes about one of the most important lessons she learned as a mother of four: *All our efforts to provide our children with fancy gifts or exciting trips may not, in the end, matter as much as the feeling they get when they sit in a tree or on our lap. For all of us, memories that contain the greatest joys are usually times when we feel connected – to ourselves, to nature, to our parents, to God. Even though these moments happened many years ago, we continue to carry within us something of their holiness.*

It is so easy not to experience such connection. Our busy lives pull us away from ourselves, so much that we forget how to breathe. We rarely hold still. Our bodies might be sitting with our children, but our minds are racing off in many other directions…. We teach our children not so much by preaching lessons or dogma to them as by the way we walk and sit and see the world. They will learn to breathe and smile and be compassionate and connected to themselves and to their world by our example.

During this Jubilee Year of Mercy it would be a blessing for each of us to incorporate into our lives, if we haven’t already done so, some spiritual discipline, a religious practice that would give us even a few moments every day to let the Lord fill our empty vessel with an abundance of his grace and strength. For some, reading a few passages of scripture each day can quiet the restless heart and put one in touch with the Spirit of God. The author I quoted uses her minivan as a monastery. As she’s shuttling
her children to and from all their schools and activities, she uses the in-between time to pray and to unite her heart with Christ. A number of parishioners take the time to begin their day at 8:30 with morning Mass in our beautiful chapel across the street. Other parishioners set aside Monday evening for Centering Prayer, or Thursday evening for Bible Study- all of which take place in the chapel. However, you don’t have to go to a church or chapel to practice spirituality. There are so many books of spiritual reading, so many daily and monthly publications, as well as online resources, like SacredSpace, a Jesuit website and app, that there’s no reason everyone can’t find a resource or venue that is appealing, easy to access and inspirational.

Most of all, I recommend St. Francis de Sales’ “Direction of Intention.” He is the patron of “to-do” lists and of people who make them. With each activity, each “to-do,” Francis de Sales suggests that you direct you intention: that is, invite the Lord to be with you and to accompany you with his grace in every meeting at work, every class at school, every duty or task at home and each trip to Safeways or through the carpool lane. When you develop this prayerful habit, Our Lord becomes your traveling companion and everything you do becomes an chance for the Lord to fill your jar to overflowing with a love that knows no limit and a joy that no one can take away from you.

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