

Light Seeping In Around the Edges
A Sermon for Every Sunday, January 17, 2016
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
John 2:1-11

For nearly fifteen years—from the mid-1960’s to the late 1970’s—it was my father’s special calling to help the poor in West Virginia, and although he was a Presbyterian minister and not a Catholic priest he took what amounted to a vow of poverty in order to do that job—offering to work at the poverty level so his ministry could be more incarnational. My mother’s calling was different. As a self-appointed evangelical missionary she was determined to share the good news about Jesus with as many people as she could while we were there in West Virginia, but as a mother she was determined that her boys would love the Lord, study hard, and stay away from junk food. As a result of my father’s poverty and my mother’s convictions, my five brothers and I didn’t have much ice cream or candy when we were growing up, and we *certainly* didn’t have soft drinks.

Except.

On the one vacation we took each year (whether we had any money or not), my father would gas up the family station wagon, we would all pile inside, and then he would drive as far as he could go before we had to stop for gas. My mother would be sitting in the front passenger seat all that time, often spreading commodity peanut butter on thick slabs of homemade whole wheat bread and handing them over into the back seat just as fast as she could. We would read books and count cows and look forward to that first gas stop, because when it came—finally—my father would do something he didn’t do at any other time of the year. He would pull up to the pump, get out of the car, and then—while

my mother was looking the other way—dig down deep into his pocket to find a quarter for each of us. We would tiptoe across the hot pavement in bare feet and come to a stop in front of the soft drink vending machine.

In those days those machines often had a long, narrow glass door on the right side through which you could see the bottle caps of the different soft drinks. You would put your quarter into the slot, open up that door like the door of a refrigerator, grab an ice-cold bottle of soda by its neck, and then give it a hard yank. If everything worked as it was supposed to the machine would release the bottle and it would come out with a loud, satisfying, “Chunk! Chunk!” There was an opener built right into the machine, so you could pop the cap off that bottle and watch the vapor from the carbonation rise to the top and waft down over the sides. That first sip was so cold, so delicious, and so satisfying (especially after waiting a year) that I can hardly describe it. The burst of orange flavor. The sweetness on my tongue. The tickle in my nose from the bubbles. *Ahhh!*

I could have made a commercial.

My favorite in those days was orange soda. I liked the reliable flavors of a Nehi Orange, the slightly sweeter taste of a Fanta, or the strong, tingling surge of an Orange Crush. Not that I was a connoisseur. When you taste only one bottle a year it’s hard to develop the discriminating taste buds necessary for such a thing. Still, I liked to think I knew my orange soda. I savored every sip. And when I daydreamed in school I sometimes dreamed of having a house with a kitchen sink that had three knobs on it: one for hot water, one for cold water, and one for orange soda. Can you imagine? Putting your glass under there, turning that knob, and watching it fill up with ice cold Fanta, or Nehi, or Orange Crush? I could imagine, and I did quite often. For me it wasn’t just the

idea of having orange soda whenever I wanted, it was the idea of having *lots* of orange soda—buckets of it, bathtubs full. With so much scarcity in my life I dreamed of abundance. Which is why this story about Jesus turning water into wine has always been one of my favorites. For most of my childhood I wished that someone would come along who could work just that sort of miracle.

Jesus was at a wedding, John says, in the little town of Cana in Galilee, which was probably just as small and poor as some of those towns I lived in when I was a boy. And because I went to some weddings then I can almost picture a wedding there: bride and groom standing outside a yellow-and-white trailer on a rainy day, her trying hard not to get mud on her white shoes while she lifts up the hem of her dress and he holds the umbrella for both of them, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and a crooked grin on his face as he pretends to hike her dress up a little higher. They've just come from the reception, which was held at the fire house because they don't allow drinking in the fellowship hall at the Baptist Church. The boys down there just backed the fire truck out into the yard, swept the concrete floor, set up some folding chairs and tables and brought in a case of Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill wine, because you don't get married every day. But then Jesus showed up with a bunch of those disciples he always ran with and before you know it the wine was gone. Everybody started giving his mother dirty looks, and that's when she came looking for Jesus.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked. “In private?”

“What is it?” he asked.

“They've run out of wine,” she said.

“That's not really our problem, is it?”

“Well,” she said, “it could be. They might not have run out if you hadn’t brought all your wine-bibbing buddies with you. Here,” she said to some of the firemen. “Do whatever he tells you.” And suddenly there they were, standing around looking at him like they were expecting some kind of a miracle or something. For a full minute he didn’t say anything. Like he told his mother, his hour had not yet come. But at last he shrugged his shoulders and asked, “Is there any water in that truck?” “Oh, yeah,” they answered. “It’s full of water.” “Well, drag a hose in here,” he said, “and fill up that tub over there.” It was one of those big galvanized metal washtubs, hanging on the wall. They used to fill it with ice and put those little bottles of Coca-Cola in it for their annual barbecue fund raiser. But for Jesus’ sake they took it down, dragged the firehose in, opened the valve just a notch and watched in amazement as dark red wine flowed out of the nozzle and into the tub. If they had been connoisseurs they might have known that it was a nice Chateau Lafite, from a good vintage year. They didn’t, but the Methodist minister who performed the ceremony (a kind of a snobby social-activist type from Ohio) took a sip and said, “Oh, my! Now that’s good wine!” And that’s when everyone there looked at the washtub full of wine, and then down at the hose still lying on the floor, and then followed it with their eyes out the door to the truck—that big tanker truck full of water—and realized with a kind of a pleasurable tingle that this was going to be the best wedding reception they had ever attended. And then they looked back at Jesus and felt the little hairs on the back of their neck stand up.

No matter how you tell the story it’s that moment that matters—the moment of epiphany—when the door between heaven and earth is opened just a crack, and the dazzling light from the other side begins to seep in around the edges. It is the moment in

the Gospels where people begin to see Jesus for who he really is. John calls this miracle in Cana a “sign,” and like all signs it points to something else. You see water turned into wine and that’s something, but then you look at the one who did it and that’s something else altogether. John says that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” Did you catch that? John doesn’t say that they believed in miracles; he says that they believed in Jesus. But what did they believe him to be? A miracle-worker? A magician? Or something more?

There was an old legend in those days about the Messiah, God’s anointed, who would come to his people Israel and set them free. Not everyone believed that legend, of course, and not everyone believed it the same way, but some of the rumors about this Messiah were that, when he came, he would usher in a new age, and that one of the characteristics of this age would be unprecedented abundance. Listen to this passage from Isaiah 25: “The Lord will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, he will swallow up death forever, and wipe away the tears from all faces. On this mountain he will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear” (vss. 7-8, 6). Or this one from Jeremiah 31: “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again” (vs. 12). “When the Messiah comes there is going to be plenty,” the Scriptures say: “the banquet table will be loaded down, the wine will flow like water.” That may not mean much to the man who has everything, but to the one who has almost nothing it would sound mighty sweet, wouldn’t it?

In those places where I grew up in West Virginia, and in the kind of poverty that was there, people put most of their hope in God. They knew that they had little chance of getting a good education or a high-paying job. Probably, like their fathers and grandfathers before them they would do what they could to scratch out a living in those stingy hills, but when times got especially hard they would pray to the only one they knew who was really on their side, and who could really do something for them, and every once in a while something would happen. Someone would show up at their door with a basket of food when they really needed it. A collection would be taken up at church for someone whose husband had been killed in the mines. Or something would happen that they couldn't explain by any natural means, and they would just marvel. They would catch a glimpse of God's glorious light seeping in around the edges of their dark reality, and they would believe in him, just like those disciples saw what Jesus did in the little mountain town of Cana, and believed in him.

When I preached on this passage six years ago a devastating earthquake had just hit Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. One journalist wrote, "I was here during the 2008 hurricanes that left thousands dead and thousands and thousands homeless, and that felt like the Apocalypse. But that pales in comparison to this." But in the aftermath of that horrific tragedy the Rev. Pat Robertson suggested that the Haitians were cursed because of a pact their ancestors made with the Devil two centuries ago. "Ever since," he said, "they have been cursed by one thing after the other." Although he didn't go so far as to say that this earthquake was God's wrath poured out on the people of Haiti what else could they infer? Robertson seems to subscribe to an Old Testament theology that makes every act an act of God. If San Francisco fell into the ocean this

afternoon, he would be on television tomorrow, telling us why. But even as I heard him make those outrageous statements I prayed that the people of Haiti would not look at things the way he does. I prayed that they could understand as we do that bad things happen to good people, sometimes to the best people we know, and for no apparent reason. When Jesus' disciples asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus said, "It wasn't this man or his parents. It was so the works of God can be seen" (John 9:3).

I prayed that that's what would happen in Haiti. I prayed that those people could understand that earthquakes happen not because God is angry, but because the crust of this living earth shifts and moves. I prayed that they would see this earthquake for the natural disaster that it was, but see in our response to that disaster the "works of God." And I think they did. As rescue workers came from this country and others, as relief flowed into the ruined city of Port-au-Prince, I think the Haitians witnessed an abundance unlike anything they had seen before, an abundance of compassion, and my prayer in those days was that they might see it as a sign—not of God's judgment, but of God's grace. I prayed that the door between heaven and earth might be opened just a crack, and that they might see light seeping in around the edges.

So may it be in all those troubled places in the world in these days. May God's people pour out God's compassion,

Until it flows like wine at a wedding.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2016