

The Vintage Life

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 2:1-11*

New Year's Eve – my sophomore year in high school. Somehow I had managed to get my parents to agree to letting me have a New Year's Eve party at our house. I must have caught them at a weak moment – but they agreed that I could have this party – and not only that, I got them to agree that they would lock themselves into their bedroom for the night. (It's not that I didn't love my parents – it's that I was 16, you understand.)

Now in my mind this was shaping up to be the party to end all parties. Most of my friends had agreed to come ... good food and good music was selected. This was going to be a party.

On top of it all I had invited Julie LePaikas as my date. She had accepted. Julie LePaikas, as they say was “out of my league”. But in a weak moment for her, she accepted. This was going to be a great night.

About a half hour before the guests were to arrive my father, God rest his soul, offered to build me a fire in the downstairs fireplace where the party was to take place. “What's a winter's party without a fire?” he asked. I was ambivalent about the idea ... but in the end gave him permission to go build us a fire. So downstairs he went while I took care of some last minute things upstairs. About ten minutes later I began to smell something. A couple minutes later I began to see something ... smoke. So I raced to the door to the downstairs ... opened it .. and there came black smoke billowing up the stairs. I made my way down the stairs and through the smoke coughing and could see my father trying to douse the flames that were licking up and out of the fireplace. “I forgot to open the flew!” he cried. I ran for more water but by the time we got the fire out the whole house was filled with smoke. My teenage life was flashing in front of my eyes.

And so on this ten degree Michigan night we opened all the windows to the house and sprayed Lysol all

over the walls. We even had to put Saran Wrap on the food to keep the smoke and Lysol from getting in it. Let me tell you if you ever want to impress your friends with a party – knock the temperature down inside the house to about 50 degrees, spray Lysol all over the house, keep Saran Wrap on the food. Let me tell you, my friends were impressed.

But then in came Julie LePaikas and all my troubles seem to disappear. The party began. About a half hour later Julie got a nosebleed and after walking around the house holding her head back for an hour she decided she better go home. Things did not improve from there. I think I ended the night with just me and my dad watching the ball drop with Dick Clark in front of, you guessed it, a fire.

It was to this moment of teenage dread and disappointment that my mind turned when I was reading again this story of the wedding at Cana. It is likely the most famous, or infamous, wedding in history – at least the one most remembered. Remembered first for what went wrong. I tell every couple I marry that at least one thing will go wrong in their wedding and if they can get their minds around that then they won't get too anxious when that wrong thing happens. And believe me I have a long list of wrong things that have happened in weddings. This gives me little comfort as we prepare for our daughter's wedding next month.

But in this first century Jewish wedding the wine runs out. I don't have time to go into all the details of what first century Jewish weddings looked like – but suffice it to say it beats a high school New Year's Eve party. These parties didn't last just a few hours, but a few days. And it was the expectation that the food and wine would keep coming. No empty platters, no empty bottles. It was the code of decent hospitality, and a sign of blessing for the couple. Maybe you start with the expensive wine first when their pallets are more sensitive, and then slip in some of the cheap stuff later on, but wine you shall have upon request. So the wine runs out. Yes, things will go wrong in your wedding, but this can't be one of them. Shame, embarrassment, disgrace begin to descend upon this poor family and poor couple.

And that's when mother Mary goes to son Jesus – and wonders if anything can be done. “They have no wine,” she says. But Jesus hesitates. He's used to being called on to give a prayer at these things, but not tend the bar. But it's more than that – now is not the time, Jesus says. And what follows is this pregnant pause. What's going to happen? What's the future going to hold for this couple? And what we learn – and maybe what Jesus learns even – is that Jesus cannot help himself but to take the circumstances at hand and somehow make them into something that brings some hope. Some encouragement. Some healing. Jesus cannot help himself but to take the circumstances at hand and somehow make them into something that brings hope and encouragement and healing. “So what do we got,” Jesus says. “We got some water. We got some jars. We got a wine steward. We got some thirsty people. Let's fill the jars with the water all the way to the top. Let's take the water to the steward. And let's see if we can't get this water to become some wine. Let's let the steward taste the water/wine and give his blessing. And let's see if we can't bring some hope and encouragement and healing to his party. And so that's what happens – water, jars, steward, blessing and before you know it people are walking around with their full glasses and saying – wow, this is some vintage. What year did you say this was? And the young couple will say – oh, that's the

year when it all went wrong.

This we shall learn is Jesus' MO. To take our present circumstance – either of fortune or misfortune – and to try to make it into something that brings hope and encouragement and healing. To produce, shall we say, a fine vintage.

It won't be long before Jesus and the disciples look out and see a few thousand hungry souls – and Jesus tells the disciples to come up with a meal plan. And the disciples commandeer a little boy's lunch and say – here's all we got, five loaves, two fish – and Jesus takes the circumstances at hand and makes them into something that brings hope and encouragement and healing. Twelve baskets left over. Quite a vintage. The woman comes to the well with her empty bucket and wounded past and Jesus takes the circumstance of her life and makes them into something of hope and encouragement and healing. And she goes back home and the homefolk see a different woman and they say, “Wow, what a vintage.” The woman caught in adultery gets thrown in front of Jesus, surrounded by a bunch of bloodthirsty angry men (who manage not to be so angry with the male accomplice in the adultery) and Jesus takes the circumstances at hand and makes them into something of hope and encouragement and healing. “Go and sin no more,” Jesus says. Go and live into your vintage.

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It just seems to be the way that Jesus works – he takes the mixed ingredients of our lives, the unsorted circumstances – and he can't help himself but to try to take what we have – and make it into some sort of rich vintage for the purposes of healing and encouragement.

And isn't that the way it so often goes – that our best opportunity to become agents of healing and encouragement in this world – comes not from getting the whole thing right, not from having the perfect elements – but from the winemaker who takes whatever conditions that prevail and makes them into a rich and unique vintage for us to share with the world.

A college friend of mine was born with a cleft palate and over the course of his childhood and young adult hood underwent well over 20 surgeries to little by little correct and repair his craniofacial issues. So would it be a surprise or not a surprise to learn that what he gave his life over to after college was to research and teaching and clinical work as a university professor in the field of craniofacial and speech issues in children. Hmm. A rich vintage.

Andrea Jaeger was the youngest woman's tennis player to be seeded at Wimbledon. She had risen up the ranks of professional tennis long before she made it half way through her teenage years. And with her rise came the loss of any semblance of childhood and family. Her dad was the overbearing coach and her friends, well she didn't have any friends. Instead she was forced into pressures and competition that would cripple the strongest of adults. Before she left her teenage years she had grown bitter and disillusioned and in the end flamed out. So would it be a surprise or not a surprise to learn that she took all of her tennis winnings and started a foundation and camp for children with cancer? And that she's given everyday of her life to since leaving tennis to be with children and give them a little joy while they faced the scariness of life? Hmm. A rich vintage.

I remember reading an article in the Wall Street Journal a few years ago entitled, Breakfast with St. Peter. It was written by Bob Brody, a New York man who had shown up for work one morning and was

informed his job had been eliminated and show the door in the afternoon. After getting over the shock he reached out to his network of associates and friends to start the process of finding a new job. One friend, Peter, with whom he had lost contact asked him to breakfast. And at breakfast began to share from his own experience of losing and finding jobs ideas on what to do. But it wasn't just one breakfast – it was many breakfasts, many coaching sessions, many emails, many phone calls. All while Peter held a very stressful New York job. And then one breakfast Peter showed up not looking himself – and was forced to reveal his secret – that all while helping his friend Bob he had been fighting prostate cancer. Why? said Bob. Oh, it takes one who needs encouragement – to know how much someone else might need the same. Hmm. A rich vintage.

Have you ever stopped to think that the events and circumstances of your life can be turned into the ingredients of a better and more meaningful future? Each one of us with the help of the winemaker has the potential with whatever the circumstances have been or are – to become a rich vintage. To somehow imagine that all of what has happened or is happening to me – are the ingredients for someone else's hope and healing?

When George Carlin the great and somewhat profane comedian died ten years ago (hard to believe) out in print came not only the story of his life, but the stories of the lives that Carlin quietly touched. As with most comedians his life was a journey of pain. Kicked out of summer camp. Dropped out of high school. Demoted in the Air Force. Drug abuse. Died a thousand deaths in front of a thousand audiences. But from such circumstances came a brilliant comedian. So would it be a surprise or not a surprise to hear the story of Liz Miele who at the age of 15 wrote to 45 comedians seeking advice on how to be a comedian. She heard back from two. One wrote and told her to become an English major. And the other called – George Carlin. And he talked with her a while and gave her some tips. Four years later they met in person and Carlin opened up his laptop and showed her all the files in which he

stored his material. Every few months they talked on the phone and Carlin became her biggest cheerleader. The last they talked was two days before he died. A rich vintage.

You know how a wine connoisseur will take a small pour of wine and hold it to the light and swirl it and sniff it and sip it and then tell you what flavors and hints she detects – a little oak, a little raspberry, a little apricot – and it's all been the result of the vintage elements – the rain, the soil, the sun, the storage, the bottling, you name it. Well, don't you wonder if it isn't the case that the compendium of our lives gets poured into a wine glass and held it to the light and swirled and sniffed and sipped – and with it comes hints of experiences and circumstances past and present? And if we let it ... and if we let the Savior ... it turns into this rich vintage? And folks will say, "Hmm ... this is good. I detect a brilliant piano recital in the fourth grade. A failed New Year's Eve party. An admission to the University of Florida (or better yet, Westminster College). A best friend who died of cancer. The strains and joys of raising three children. A difficult divorce. A health scare. A gold watch after 30 years with the company. Seven grandchildren. But most all," they'll say, "I detect the winemaker. He always seems to make the best wine. Hints of hope, encouragement and healing."

A most rich vintage.



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