

JESUS AND THE PERIODIC TABLE

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January 20, 2013

I have a friend who knows a lot about wine. He has a fairly discriminating palate when it comes to wine. He can tell a good wine from a cheap wine. Me – I can't tell Boone's Farm from Bordeaux, (I'm a Presbyterian minister, it wasn't until I was 40 that I realized that the cup of communion was grape juice) – but my friend knows how to twirl, to sniff the bouquet, to sip and then to savor a glass of good wine. He has a wine cellar that contains hundreds of bottles of wine from all around the world. He has uncorked a couple of those bottles for me to taste – and I've always felt bad about it ... like casting pearls before swine. He also knows a lot about what goes into the making of good wine. I asked him this week to tell me about that. And what he shared with me took me back to my days of high school science and chemistry. He told me about the sun and the rain and the soil. He told me about minerals inside the soil. Calcium, magnesium, nitrogen. He told me about roots and how deep they grow. He told me about northern exposure and southern exposure. He told me about yeast and fermentation and oaken barrels. He told me about oxidation. He told me about letting the wine breathe. He told me about the years it takes to make a good wine and how all the elements have to work together in just the right way. It is both science and art, my friend says. And it brought back to me – this discussion of the elements of winemaking – Hydrogen, Oxygen, Magnesium, Calcium, Nitrogen – it brought me back to that big chart that hung at the front of my Chemistry class – the Periodic Table.

I use to have nightmares about the Periodic Table. The Periodic Table was not my friend. Nevertheless the Periodic Table outlines the raw elements of life. All those elements that go into making life – all of life – what it is. It is the stuff of life. You and I are walking Periodic Tables. When you get your blood test results back ... it is a list of the raw elements of your life. How much iron, how much calcium, how much magnesium. When you pop a vitamin in the morning you are popping a piece of the periodic table. The periodic table is the stuff of life.

So from the moment that two atoms of hydrogen connect with one atom of oxygen to form a molecule of water that end up somewhere up in a cloud and form drops of rain that fall to the earth and seep into some soil in the south of France and are soaked into a root that form a vine that produce leaves and grapes that get picked and get crushed and get stored and fermented and get bottled and get bought for too much money and get opened and get swished and sniffed and sipped and savored – it has been the science of the elements of the universe – the stuff of life – at work guided by the artistic and creative skills of the human soul. It may take years, but water somehow gets turned into wine.

All of this, of course, makes the story we just read all the more amazing. It takes place at a wedding, John tells us. A wedding in a little town in Cana, just down the road from where Jesus grew up in Nazareth. In this little town there is this young couple who has gotten married. A common enough couple that we are given no names. But it is a wedding. It is the stuff of life. You've been to dozens of these. Two become one. Two who will become one and someday bring together the elements of life to create, with God's help, even more life. So there at this wedding they are dancing and eating and drinking and kibitzing and making solemn vows. It's the stuff of life.

And the first of the miracles that takes place in this little town of Cana is that Jesus shows up. Jesus, who John describes to us a chapter earlier as the Word who was in the beginning with God, the Word who was and is God, the Word through whom all things are made, this Word which became flesh and dwelt among us, this Word who became flesh and moved into the neighborhood, this Word who was given the name Jesus – it is this Word who shows up at a wedding. Who enters into the stuff of life. The periodic elements of life. The eating and the drinking and the kibitzing and the dancing and the sacred union – he shows up for this stuff.

Has not the creator of the universe got bigger plans? Doesn't he have some world council to attend? Doesn't he have some cosmic event to bring about? What's he doing at a wedding? But John tells us that the Word became flesh and showed up at a wedding reception down at the local catering hall.

This is something. This is miracle. Earth and heaven are colliding down at the local Elks Lodge.

Not that anyone in the story really knows that. For most, Jesus is just the local rabbi who has paid a visit to some friends of the family on the occasion of their special day. And maybe Jesus would like to keep it that way. Slip in, slip out. Kiss the bride. Shake hands with the groom. Leave a card with a check and slip away.

But Mary knows better. She knows the miracle of what is happening. She's known it from thirty years back when the angel visited and said that somehow God was going to enter in the stuff of life. The Word would become flesh in her. That somehow, somehow the Periodic Table would be configured within her to bring out not just a baby – but the Baby. God would mess with the stuff of life. God would take on the stuff of life. God would be concerned with the stuff of life. So when Jesus walks into that wedding hall Mary already sees the miracle before anyone else sees the miracle. The Word has become flesh and is dancing the Hava Nagila in the middle of the room.

And so, as the stuff of life so often goes, the stuff does not work out as planned. Someone made a mistake with the wine order because the party still has a long ways to go but there is no more wine. They have run out of wine. In first century Palestinian culture, it is a disgrace. It is violation against the middle-eastern code of hospitality. You never run out of wine. Maybe a little cheaper wine at the end while they are not feeling the difference – but you never run out of wine.

So Mary seeing the miracle of Word become flesh before her – goes to Jesus and says simply, “They have no wine.” It was the same as saying, “Someone is about to get humiliated. Someone is about to be made fun of. Someone is about to be bitterly embarrassed. Someone is about to have the biggest day of their life turn into the worst day of their life. Here it is, my son, this is the stuff of life. This is what you got born into.”

And so with some hesitation, Jesus enters further into the elements. He reaches into the stuff, the messy stuff. And because wine starts from water, Jesus asks for some water. And all the rest is mystery. The Periodic Table is configured such that—what for us is time bound— a process that is bound to the time of years – what for us is time bound, becomes for the creator of the elements timeless. The stuff of life is transformed such that no one has to be humiliated, no one has to be made fun of, no one has to be bitterly embarrassed. The time is redeemed and the party can continue.

You will see the same thing when he feeds the five thousand with five loaves. Or when he speaks with the woman at the well with her bucket of water. Or when he meets the suspicious Nicodemus at night. Such is the stuff of life – people go hungry, women get abandoned by their husbands, hearts get hardened. These though are the things that Jesus enters into when the Word becomes flesh. And he takes the stuff we've got and tries to redeem it. He works to configure our Periodic Tables such that we might find joy. Not with some magic wand, but through the mysterious movement of his spirit.

You've seen it happen. I've actually seen him turn wine into water. When my friend, another friend, I'll call him John, in his effort to cope with a stressful job on Wall Street would look forward to when he got home so he could start to drink. A couple drinks at night turned into a lot of drinks over the weekend that turned into a stop at the bar in the morning on the way to the train and a stop for a flask, for the train ride home. But he "didn't have a problem." So he told me. Until he lost his license. Until he lost his job. He was humiliating himself. Someone needed to turn the wine into water for John. He found AA. He found that the Jesus he had known since he was a kid could actually be the higher power they talked about. And the higher power worked on the Periodic Table of his life, entered into the stuff of his life, and turned the drink in his glass from wine to water. Every time he sees me he tells me how many years it's been since the wine turned into water.

A couple sat before me years ago – she the victim of his serial adultery. Over and over again. And there was nothing in her left to give. "I need help," he said. "Too late," she said. But help is what he looked for. Intense psychological and spiritual help. And somewhere in the midst of it he sensed that there was One in heaven who had not given up on him yet. And the deep wounds in his soul got touched by the Word made

flesh. The Periodic Table inside got configured differently and he began to live a different life. And the different life became an attraction to the woman he had so deeply wounded and they found each other again.

Or the American man I met in Honduras a couple years ago who had years before made a visit to Honduras on a mission trip and said to himself that it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that so much illness and death in this the poorest of all countries was the result of bad drinking water. Disease was born by bad water. It didn't take a scientist to figure that out, but it did take one to figure out how to make the water in Honduran villages clean again and with little cost. But moved by the Lord of all the elements they figured out how to filter bad water and make it drinkable. And now the man commits his life to traveling the Honduran countryside turning bad water into good water.

On this weekend when we inaugurate for the second time an African-American President we are reminded that the time was not long ago when people of color weren't allowed at the lunch counter, not to mention the Oval Office. The slaves had been freed a hundred years before but deep prejudice remained. Not much you can do to change that, they said. But a young preacher began to preach. The Gospel was proclaimed. The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhoods of cities like Birmingham and Mobile and Detroit and Atlanta. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He began to mess with the stuff of life. The periodic table of the prejudices of life, wherein people were humiliated and embarrassed and shamed. Hardened hearts. Unjust laws. Vehement people. Into the stuff he went and hardened hearts began to soften. And laws began to change. And people began to see differently. It was like water turning into wine.

These are the miracles.

What would we expect from one who begins our journey at the waters of baptism and takes us to the wine of the new covenant? Common elements, of course. But when the Word made flesh walks into the wedding, things change. When the Word made flesh attends the font, things change. When the Word made

flesh prepares the feast, things change. The Periodic Table is reconfigured. The elements are arranged. The stuff is entered into.

And that means, of course, your stuff too. The good stuff, the bad stuff. The ugly stuff. Even those times when all there is, is emptiness. Dry casks where wine once was held. Be not afraid. For Messiah has come. The Word has moved into the neighborhood. He has arrived in Cana. And is ready, when you are, to work with the elements.