

THE RIGHT CONTAINER FOR JESUS

Scriptures: Mark 2:18-22; Isaiah 25:6-9

You may have seen this story last year in the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper, but let me read part of it for you. It took place in Washington, D. C.

A grand feast of marinated steaks and jumbo shrimp was winding down, and a group of friends was sitting on the back patio of a Capital Hill home, sipping red wine. Suddenly, a hooded man slid in through an open gate and put the barrel of a handgun to the head of a 14 year-old guest. “Give me your money, or I’ll start shooting,” he demanded....

The other five guests, including the girl’s parents, froze—and then one spoke. “We were just finishing dinner,” Christina “Cha Cha” Rowan, 43, blurted out. “Why don’t you have a glass of wine with us?” The intruder took a sip of their Chateau Malescot St-Exupery and said, “That’s good wine.”

The girl’s father, Michael Rabdau, ... told the intruder to take the whole bottle. The would-be robber, his hood now down, took another sip and had a bite of Camembert cheese that was on the table. Then he tucked the gun into the pocket of his nylon sweatpants. “I think I may have come to the wrong house,” he said, looking around the patio. “I’m sorry,” he told the group. “Can I get a hug?”

Rowan ... stood up and wrapped her arms around him. Then it was Rabdau’s turn. Then his wife’s. The other two guests complied. “That’s really good wine,” the man said, taking another sip. He had a final request: “Can we have a group hug?” The five adults surrounded him arms out. With that the man walked out with a crystal wine glass in hand, filled with Chateau Malescot. No one was hurt, and nothing was stolen (July 13, 2007).

Never underestimate the power of a good wine. That, in a sense, is the point Jesus makes in our scripture reading to the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist. The Pharisees and the disciples of John could be austere at times. They did not believe in wild parties. They believed that religion should be a serious affair, conducted with a healthy fear of God’s judgment and a ready willingness to repent. That is the meaning of fasting. In Bible times fasting was done for two purposes: a) because you felt guilty and needed God’s forgiveness, and b) because you were afraid and needed God’s deliverance. Given the fact that Israel, at that time, had strayed from God and was suffering oppression at the hands of a foreign army, fasting made sense. It hardly seemed like a time for wine and cheese.

But Jesus in effect says to them, “Why don’t you have a glass of wine with us? Why don’t you come join the party?” To the Pharisees and the disciples of John this sounded just as bizarre as Christina Rowan’s suggestion to the robber. What do you mean have a glass of wine? Can’t you see that we have bad situation here?

I wonder if Jesus' response makes any better sense today. Look at what is going on in the world: earthquakes in China, cyclones in Burma, tornadoes in the Midwest, war in the Middle East, global warming, food shortages, widespread crime and violence. In a world like that shouldn't Christians be on their knees fasting and praying for God's mercy? The Pharisees thought so. So did the disciples of John the Baptist. But Jesus says, "The wedding guest cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast."

To understand this, we must go back to our first scripture lesson from Isaiah 25. In verses 6-7 Isaiah says,

On this mountain the Lord of hosts 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. [Probably a Chateau Malescot St-Euxpery!] And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Never underestimate the power of a good wine. In Isaiah, the kingdom of God is pictured as a banquet where great wine is served and Camembert cheese, and where robbers put down their weapons and death puts down its sting, and people from all nations live in prosperity and peace.

Jesus uses a similar image for the kingdom of God in one of his parables. He says, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son." In the last book of the Bible, Revelation 19:9, an angel says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." In the Bible the kingdom of God is pictured as a wedding banquet where everyone celebrates the joy and blessing of God's presence.

Now here is the surprise: in Jesus this great wedding banquet has begun. That is the point Jesus makes to the Pharisees and the disciples of John. He says, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?" The obvious implication is that Jesus is the bridegroom, which means that with Jesus here we can start the celebration. In Jesus the kingdom of God has begun. We don't have to fast to receive God's forgiveness; Jesus has already given it to us. We don't have to fast in order for God to save us. God has already come to save us in Jesus.

Now this does not mean that everything will go well for us from here on out. In the next verse Jesus says, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day." This is obviously referring to Jesus' death. There will be times when Jesus' followers will feel sad and broken, and in those times they may not feel like celebrating; they may not even feel like eating. There may also be times like that in your own life, times when you don't feel like celebrating or even eating.

Even though the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus, it is still a hidden kingdom, a kingdom we see only in glimpses when the sick are healed, when the hungry are fed, and when the alienated are brought back together. Jesus' arrival has not yet put an end to all death and suffering and conflict. But that does not change what has happened. In Jesus the power of death

has been broken. It has not yet been eradicated, but it has been broken. It is like spring. There may still be snow on the ground in certain places, but warmth and light and hope are beginning to win. In Jesus the wedding feast of God's kingdom has begun, and death cannot stop it. Neither can earthquakes, cyclones, tornadoes, war, famine, illness, or any possible tragedy in your life. God is going to win; it is just a matter of time.

And here is the good news. You can be part of the celebration even now. We call it communion. Never underestimate the power of a good wine. I know. We don't use wine; we use grape juice, which to some of you is a big disappointment. But the idea still applies. This table, this communion service, is a taste of the great wedding feast that Jesus has begun. At this table the bridegroom is here. You may not recognize him. The Pharisees did not recognize the bridegroom in their time, either. But he is here. At this table you can receive Jesus himself into your life, and with him the eternal blessing and joy that God intends for you and for the whole creation. Coming to this party can change your life, just as it did the robber in Washington, D. C.

Ah, but here Jesus gives us a warning. Verse 22: "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins." Do you see the warning? If you drink the wine that Jesus offers at this table, even if it is only grape juice, you better be prepared to become a new person. Because Jesus won't fit in the old person. The new wine Jesus offers, the new life Jesus brings, requires a new container.

The problem with new wine is that it is still fermenting. It is still expanding and producing carbon dioxide. Old wineskins are usually hard and brittle; they don't flex anymore. When new wine is put in old wineskins, the wine ferments and expands, and it bursts the brittle, inflexible old skins.

That is the danger. If you take Jesus into your life, if you drink the wine or grape juice at this table, it will cause ferment in your life, and you had better be prepared for that. It will push you into situations and places you never thought you would go. It will expand your boundaries. It will cause you to care about people and situations that you never cared about before. It will change your priorities, because it will expose how empty your self-centered priorities have always been. It will give you a meaning and purpose in life that is bigger than your own gratification. But if you are hardened and inflexible, if you are not open to the changes God wants to make in your life, this new wine will burst your bubble. It will not let you go on the way you are.

After the robber left the Washington, D. C. party, the people at the house immediately called the police. Michael Rabdau, the father of the girl who had the gun pointed at her said, "I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty. He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don't know what it was."

I know what it was. It was the taste of new wine. The party is on; the bridegroom is here. But when you taste the wine Jesus gives, you cannot be the same person you were before.

- Ken Onstot
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