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**DESIGNATED DRIVERS? (Psalm 36:5-10 John 2:1-11)**

Reading Scripture invites a lot of questions. A particular question I ask when preparing to preach is, "What would this look like if it happened today?" In response to that question, this week, the part of the wedding at Cana story that struck me most forcefully was:

"When the steward tasted the water had become wine ... the steward ... said... 'Everyone serves the good wine first, then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk.'" In this post-holiday season, when in the midst of plenty, we talk more about the buffet table items we walked past than the ones we enjoyed; when we designate drivers, so there is at least one person able to drive when it's time to leave; in an age of conspicuous consumption and more conspicuous restraint; it strikes me that today, a host would be hard pressed to wait until the guests were drunk to serve the discount wine.

What would happen if, well into our celebrations, Jesus provided the finest wine of all? Unlike guests of an earlier time, it's not likely that we would have already indulged too much to appreciate it. But, are we also unlike them, in that we might not be willing to indulge enough to appreciate it?

Oh, someone will lift the glass to the light and swirl it, allowing us to assess the color and looking for what clings to the inside of the goblet. Does this wine have legs? Then we'll lower the glass and swirl again, this time under our noses, catching the bouquet of fruit and wood and the ever popular "berry notes." (Cross eyes.) How about its nose? Then it's time to drink. Some of us will quickly cap our glass with our hand, and say, "Oh thank you, but maybe next time. I'm the designated driver." Vicarious enjoyment is enough for us, at least on this occasion. Some of us will take a measured taste: rolling the wine around in our mouths; measuring tannin levels or sweetness; (Are you starting to worry about how much your pastor knows about wine? :-)) We'll ask ourselves if it's velvet on our tongues; or raw and lacking in generosity; trying to determine if it measures up to our earlier analyses.

And let's not forget the last group of us -- the ones who are feeling inexperienced and new at this. Willing to trust the expert's word that it's good, we take a cautious sip, not sure what we're supposed to notice, and afraid to look foolish by saying the wrong thing, so we say and do nothing at all.

At the end of the evening, we may discover that while we have drunk from the cup, we are left with the question, "Have we indulged enough to appreciate it?"

It may be a particularly contemporary liberal protestant risk, especially when it comes to the wine of the Spirit, that we don't indulge enough to enjoy it. A susceptibility born of two of the greatest strengths of our heritage: The first -- the commitment to an educated, informed laity that results in a thinking faith -- which, when honed to its sharpest edge, is an approach that can produce a thoughtful faithful people out of practice with feeling.

There is a second tenet of our traditions that shapes our indulgence in the Spirit, and that is the conviction that because the Lord God has indeed poured out the Spirit on all flesh, we are a

priesthood of all believers; developed to its fullest expression, it can create what on the surface seems a community, but is in fact a set of individuals each trying to fulfill their individual sense of vision.. Now, if there is any belief more likely to produce a group of designated drivers, it's a challenge to think of one. For, even as we celebrate the gift of the Spirit for everyone, we have learned that, while designated drivers don't drink from the cup, we do get to decide when its time to leave, the route and the destination. In other words, the designated drivers are "IN CONTROL" in more ways than one.

There is an extraordinary, seductive appeal to being in control – a feeling that is challenged by God's promise that Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. The only way to live abundantly is to give up some of the control. Walter Brueggeman writes: "For those of us who traffic in the church with our little truths, for those of us who live in the scientific community and imagine we will be saved by our knowing, for those who live in the university and have such great confidence in our reason, this is a hard word, because it announces that the management of our life is beyond us and we can feel undone." We can feel so undone that if the cost of abundant life is loss of control, many of us feel safer settling for what a cartoon in the *New Yorker* referred to as a "near life experience."

Episcopal priest and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes worshipping at Al Green's Full Gospel Tabernacle. It was a three hour service complete with enormous choir and a brass band. The pulses of the music built until people began to be slain in the spirit. People did jerking dances in the aisles and one woman was so overcome she fell to the floor and an usher covered her legs with a sheet so her petticoat did not show.

Taylor wrote: "I felt like I was caught in the middle of a thunderstorm, so I did what you are supposed to do: I made myself very small and held perfectly still. Lightning did not strike, which was the answer to my prayer, but in the months since I have wondered... If I had been in the room on the first Pentecost, would I have done the same thing? 'Oh God, if you are about to pour out your Spirit and this is what it looks like, would you please skip me?'"

"Thank you, but no thank you. I'll be the designated driver." Taylor's story suggests that our desire for control is not the only reason we hesitate to drink deeply of the Spirit. We are cautious because we are afraid. Oh, we are less afraid that our petticoats will show, than our vulnerabilities. We are less concerned that we will be the ushers called upon to bandage someone else's wounds, than that we will need to ask for help in healing our own. And all our study of God's word, all our analysis, all the records of those faithful who have gone before us; all of our collective and individual experience allows us no illusions. To yield our role as designated drive is to risk being caught up in something larger than our own lives, our own households, or even our own congregation. Becoming a part of something larger comes at the cost of needing to yield control – of details, of outcome, possibly even our preferred manner of functioning of , because that thing larger than ourselves, involves people and places and goals other than ourselves and our own ends. It is that kind of drinking deeply and trusting the Spirit that we will be asked to do again and again throughout the year as we re-organize our life together, re-energize our mission and serve a wider world.

The good news is this: That same history and experience that shows us the risks and costs also lifts to the light the sure promise, that to open ourselves to the Spirit is to open ourselves to God's transforming our existence from "near-life" to "life-abundant."

Taylor's story reminded me of an experience of my own, albeit, one much more Presbyterian in flavor. I was baptized in 1984 after a six month debate with my pastor about

what possible difference having someone splash water on my head in front of 800 people could make in my life. If I had had any hint -- any clue at all -- that because of my baptism, I would one day quit my job and move 600 miles to go to seminary, so that someday people might reach for my hand in a hospital room; or invite me into their homes for a meal and then call to ask me to bring it; come with tears in their eyes saying, "We prayed for this child for years. Please baptize her;" that then total strangers would tweak me about my quirks (not that I have any:-), or hug me in grocery stores; that husbands and wives with anger-etched faces, would ask, "Help us help our marriage;" or that the phone would ring in the early morning hours, a trembling voice saying, "Please come -- "my father is dying" or "my son has attempted suicide;" that I would come to love and be loved by people with whom I am bound by neither blood nor marriage -- if I had any hint at all that I would lose control of my life in such ways, I would have with great haste turned my goblet to the table linens and with a hand firmly on its base, announced, "Thank you, but no thank you. I'll be the designated driver. Without a doubt, that's what I would have said and done...."

From where I stand now, I can only say, "It's the best wine I've ever drunk."

We have all been offered, and will be offered again, as individuals and as a congregation, the opportunity to indulge in the wine of the Spirit. At such times, let us draw on our collective memory, recalling that on life's journey we are not the designated drivers. Let us rejoice that the One who is promises us that, whole or broken, unblemished or flayed to the bone, we will arrive safely at our journey's end. Let us know and experience again, that no one will ever say the wine of the Spirit lacks generosity, for it is indeed the most gracious wine of all. It has not only legs and nose, but comes to us full-bodied bearing the loving heart of God and healing hands of Christ into our lives.

Let us pray:

Lord, our God, You are in our midst, grant us the courage to take the cup, the trust to drink deeply, the freedom to allow ourselves to be caught up in something larger than ourselves, and the joy of life abundant. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **PRAYER OF DEDICATION**

Bountiful God: Accept the gifts we make this day – the portions that sustain the body of your son, the portions that serve our neighbors in need and that which reaches a half a world away to show your Son's compassion to people we will never know. bless us and these gifts, that they might be used wisely, effectively and generously in the world. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People:**

Merciful God: We draw near to you in prayer, giving thanks for the blessings in our lives – for the brilliant snow that brightens gray days, for warm spells that remind us of seasons to follow, for a community gather in worship and prayer, for breath that comes easily and muscles that perform their tasks.

As we give thanks for these gifts, we ask for your wisdom in how we use them – the portions that you have given us for our own enjoyment, and that which you have given us to share. Help us to take the energy, the gifts, the faith and commitment, and the wealth of our lives and let them be transformed into a life abundant for us and for those in need around us. Grant that we serve your world with hope and compassion  
wherever there is loneliness  
illness

hunger  
fear  
catastrophe  
war

We pray with these words and with the ones your Son taught us saying