

Filled to the Brim

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Reading: John 2:1-10

It is traditional in many parts of the world to have a great party, a carnival, at this time of year. People of all ages, races, shapes and sizes gather to eat and drink, sing and dance. Often it is one last celebration before the Christian season of Lent. One of the most famous we know as “Marti Gras” in New Orleans. It is literally translated, “Fat Tuesday,” which immediately precedes Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the season of fasting that begins with the somber words, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Like a New Orleans jazz funeral march winding its way to the graveyard, we do not deny the darkness. But we face the loss with a celebration of the goodness that is always part of our lives.

Brian Eno, who has been observing the Nodding Hill Carnival in London for years, asked himself, what makes for a great carnival? He wrote,

Carnival is good when it lets people present the best part of themselves and be, for a little while, as they'd be like to be all the time. Carnival is good when it gives people the feeling that they're really lucky to be alive right here and now. Carnival is good when it leaves people with the feeling that life in all its bizarre manifestations is unbeatably lovely and touching and funny and worthwhile.

And so, thinking about today's Mardi Gras Sunday, my mind settled upon this story from our tradition. As the story goes, there had just been a wedding at Cana, and the people were preparing for some serious celebrating. According to ancient custom, the festivities usually brought the bride to the groom's house. There then was the wedding feast lasting up to seven days! Talk about a party!

Weddings were important community events. They were usually lengthy affairs at which banquets and wine were central parts. For relatively poor communities, they were times for rejoicing, times to strengthen family ties and times to establish a new home with festivities and good wishes. Remember that they would celebrate even under an oppressive Roman occupation that extracted all the wealth, forcing the majority into poverty. And we should see all of Jesus' words and actions through this lens.

In the ancient Near East hospitality was a sacred duty. What a calamity to run out of food or drink to offer a guest! How a humble home would be shamed in front of the whole community if that should happen. So, what a kind thing that Jesus does—to come to the aid of the couple, of their families and his mother. It's typical of the love Jesus would show throughout his life.

Now I may be one of the first to talk about the dangers and pitfalls of alcohol and excess. But I like this story because right in a genuine wing-ding, there is Jesus. And what is he doing? Is he

shaking his finger at the crowd because they have succumbed to the lustful desires of the flesh?
No.

No, in John's story you can find Jesus standing in the middle of the chaos busily making more wine. That's right—adding fuel to the fire! And not just a little bit. The story says he used six stone jars used for rites of purification, each holding 20 to 30 gallons of water. That's *120 to 180 gallons of wine! That's a lot of wine, an enormous amount!* And John even makes a special effort to say that they filled each stone jar *to the brim*. And we also hear that a good host will serve the good wine first. Why? Because after that they may not be able to distinguish the good from the bad. And with Jesus, all of it was the good stuff. So this was quite the party!

This has been one of my favorite passages because it seems to be emphasizing the positives and not the negatives, the do's and not the don'ts. But most of Christianity reminds me of H. L. Mencken's famous definition of Puritanism: "The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Garrison Keillor, in his book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, describes a character of an imaginary town who returns to deliver a list of grievances after the fashion of Martin Luther's 95 Theses at Wittenberg. This character is protesting what their negative religion has done to him:

Suffering was its own reward, to be preferred to pleasure. We viewed pleasure with suspicion. Birth control was never an issue with us. Nor was renunciation of pleasures of the flesh. We never enjoyed them in the first place...I find it very hard to whoop it up, hail a pal, split a gut, cut a rug, have a ball or make a joyful noise. I'm your boy all right." (p. 259-261)

Through the centuries we have called Jesus "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." Indeed, he was that. But Jesus was multidimensional, and this passage reminds us that he could also share the joys of life.

It is perhaps one of our greatest sins—not to enjoy life, not to accept it as a precious gift and savor each moment.

There are different reasons why we lose our ability to enjoy life:

- we become carried away with our responsibilities;
- we become filled with anxiety about the future;
- we become preoccupied and therefore cannot enjoy the present moment;
- we become so wounded by past events that we play them over and over in our minds; and
- we become overwhelmed by how difficult it is to work for justice in our society.

Jesus, the spiritual guide, invites us to enjoy our moments and to drink deeply from life.

In his own spiritual practice Jesus himself fasted, denied himself and lived simply, modestly. But for Jesus, it was ultimately not about denying or resisting that which is bad, but embracing and celebrating that which is good. *For Jesus, life is filled to the brim with sweet things to embrace and celebrate things such as goodness, gentleness, tenderness. And it was this mystical awareness that led Jesus to look beyond himself and eventually, to lose his life in the struggle.*

Authentic religious experience is based upon joy, happiness and abundance. All the traditions point to this—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam—that religious practice should lead one to an experience of peace, bliss and contentment. Jesus, and the heart of the Christian tradition is no different. Religious systems that are based upon fear, threats and rules completely miss the point, which is that even in the harshest moments of our lives, there is a cup that is overflowing. Everything that Jesus did came from this, from an internal sense that all is well, a sense of being loved. It begins and ends here. So, while the suffering and struggle of Lent is looming, we start here.

The life of Jesus shows us a Reality that is abundantly present, a God who wants us to be happy, a God who wants us to enjoy life, a God who gives all everything we need, cares about us and responds to us. Sufi master, Vilayat Khan, once said, “Why aren’t you dancing with joy this very moment? *This is the only relevant spiritual question.*”

Several years ago, I read an excellent book by literature professor, Regina Schwartz. In her book, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, she points out there are two strains in our tradition. One is based upon *scarcity* that leads to violence, conquest and domination. The other strain—the one in which Jesus locates himself—it based upon *abundance*, which leads to generosity, compassion and justice.

There’s a wonderful little movie that came out several years ago called “Chocolat,” in which the main character, a young mother, and her daughter blow into a small French village with the North Wind. She is immediately viewed with suspicion because she doesn’t attend church and has a way of befriending the wrong kind of people. But the major conflict arises when she opens a chocolate shop just as the season of Lent begins. The town leaders portray her a demonic, leading the town people astray during the time of abstinence and fasting.

The young pastor, who was bullied into denouncing her, suddenly has a change of heart and finally finds his own voice on Easter Sunday:

Do I want to talk of the miracle of our divine Lord’s transformation? Not really. I don’t want to talk about his divinity. I’d rather talk about his humanity. I mean, you know how he lived his life here on earth—his kindness, his tolerance. Listen, I think we can’t go around measuring our goodness by what we don’t do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist and who we exclude. I think we’ve got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create and who we include.

Friends, I do not believe that God wants us just to sit in our houses, solemn with our hands folded. I believe that God wants us to have a good time while we are here—that our joy may be full. And I believe that as human beings, we have a joy that is unending. *Every moment of our lives is filled to the brim with the love of God. Each day overflows with the presence of the Divine. May we savor all that is Sweet and Sacred in this world.*

In the movie, “Auntie Mame,” the main character played by Rosalind Russell says, “Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death!” Life *is* this amazing, lavish banquet. It is filled to the brim with goodness to be savored. This is an important part of the message of Jesus, the Anointed One. We don’t realize it, but our souls don’t have to starve. Even in the most difficult times of our lives, there is a rich abundance hidden from our view but within our reach.

Even in the dark valley, when we are surrounded by enemies, there is a table set for us with a cup that is overflowing. And so...

Tyrants and wanna-be-dictators, who take away our rights and our democracy, and Billionaires and oligarchs, who steal from the national treasury and ordinary families, and Politicians giddy with power to dominate—they all think that they can crush us. But they'll look and see us joyful and celebrating and say, "What is *wrong* with these people?" Because this is something they cannot understand. And they will never understand.

"What kind of Jesus followers *are* these people?" they ask. "They don't celebrate prosperity or conquest. They celebrate the tender mercies of life. They celebrate their fragile humanity. They celebrate their solidarity with others, especially the vulnerable and hurting. They celebrate even in their despair."

Jesus said that there is a kind of joy that can never be taken away. It is something that the world cannot understand. It is a joy that is a resistance to the selfishness, the greed and the violence of our world. Amen.