

Sunday, March 19, 2006

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Janice Smith Ammon



Wine Making and Soul Making

Mark 2:13-22

Ever-revealing God, we ask that You be with us as we once again enter into Your scriptures on this third Sunday of Lent. We ask that You please open us to what You desire us to see and know and understand about You, and one another, and ourselves. And we also ask this morning, O God, that somehow, by Your Spirit, that my simple words may become Your Word for us. For we pray with anticipation in Jesus' precious name, Amen.

When Greg and I lived in the City, we were in an apartment over on 56th and Lexington. This meant that I crossed Park Avenue on my way to and from the Church each day. Well, I loved that walk at Christmas-time, when the trees in the center island of Park Avenue were covered with white lights, stretching as far as you could see. For me, it captured the magic of the season, and the magic of the city.

But I especially loved it in the spring, when thousands of tulips would bloom in the center island. And in the evening, when I would walk home, all of these thousands of tulips would be bending toward the west, faces following the afternoon sun. And, I'll tell you, every time I saw those bending tulips at the end of the day, I always wondered if I was as faithful about keeping my face turned to the light – to the light of God. For me, this was a bit of spiritual direction, a bit of soul making right here on a street corner in midtown Manhattan.

You know, in the Gospels, Jesus frequently uses familiar people, ordinary objects, and everyday scenes to teach about the Kingdom of God, to teach about spiritual growth, to teach about soul making. Jesus frequently uses people and objects and scenes that would have been familiar to his first century followers. Jesus frequently talks about shepherds and widows, farmers and field hands, fisherman and tax collectors, brides and bridegrooms. He frequently talks about sparrows and sheep, mustard seeds and salt, grapes and grain, leaven and oil lamps.

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Sometimes I wonder, if Jesus were physically here in New York City – we know he is here on another level and comes to us in many ways. But, if Jesus were physically right here in our City, on our streets, I wonder what people and objects and scenes he would use today to teach us about the Kingdom of God, to teach us about spiritual growth, to teach us about soul making. I wonder if he might talk about those tulips that stretch to keep their faces toward the sun.

I wonder if he would teach us about persistence in tough circumstances by pointing out the tender sapling that somehow always manages to grow, through what appears to be solid cement. Or if he might take us to the boat pond in Central Park to see *Pale Male*, the red tail hawk that nests, and breeds, and raises his young across the street, over a window on the front of a Fifth Avenue apartment building.

I wonder if he would teach us about hope amidst despair, or light amidst darkness, by talking about a wonderful New York phenomenon – the phenomenon of sunlight reflecting off the windows of other buildings. My office here at the church faces north. There is no direct sunlight that comes into my office at all. And the tall building next door further blocks light from my windows. Perhaps many of you experience this in your apartment or office as well. But yet, there is a time each sunny day when the sunlight reflects off the windows of a building across the way, and bright, bright sun light shines into my office. I love it when this happens, for it reminds me of the creative ways God's light can shine into our lives, even when it seems impossible. It also reminds me of the responsibility we each have to be

reflectors of God's light into the shadows of other lives.

I imagine Jesus would also talk about our workplaces and our dwelling spaces, though I will leave it up to each of you to decide just what he might say! I imagine Jesus would talk about doormen and taxi drivers and street preachers and subway riders. I imagine He would talk about the men and women who come to sleep on our steps each night – and the men and women who come to care for them. I imagine Jesus might even tell a story about a conversation I overheard a few years ago, when I went to meet a member for a cup of coffee at the Sony Center over on 55th and Madison. That morning, most of the seats were already filled with coffee drinkers and newspaper readers. The only open table with two chairs was next to two men who were homeless, as I could tell from their attire and their over-stuffed plastic bags that were tucked beneath the table at their feet.

The tables were close to one another, and I did not want to intrude. So when I sat down, I pulled out my planner, and tried to busy myself. However, I couldn't help but over hear their conversation. The one man said to the other, "Hey, did you hear that Johnny Cash died?" The other man said, "Yeah, I did. Isn't that a shame? You know, I think it was tough for him after his wife, June Carter Cash, died a few months ago. I bet he probably died from a broken heart." The first man said, "Well, that's what happened to my mother after my father died. She was never the same after that." The other man then said, "Well, not with my parents. They broke up when I was kid. My mother used to *bad mouth* my father all the time. Finally when I got older, when I was a teenager, I asked her not to do that anymore because it hurt me too much."

I will confess to you that this wasn't exactly the conversation I expected to hear from two homeless men from the streets of New York City. Conversations like this one break down the boundaries, and dismantle the stereotypes that we all like to construct around those who are different, around those whom we do not understand, around those whose presence makes us uncomfortable, around those whom we fear.

Perhaps this is not unlike the Pharisees, the religious leaders, in our scripture passage for this morning. For they wanted to know why Jesus would ever eat with tax collectors and sinners. "Tax collectors and sinners" is a collective term for all those they did not feel were politically or religiously clean. They could not understand why Jesus would eat with them. Yet, Jesus knows how transforming coming to a table can be. Or, as I found out, how transforming even coming along side of a table can be. Jesus is about breaking down barriers and dismantling stereotypes, so community and healing and wholeness can happen for all.

You see, with Jesus, the world is different. Here in

our scripture passage, in the Gospel of Mark, we are barely out of the first chapter and into the second, and already we see that Jesus goes about life in a completely different way. Already we see that Jesus is challenging and changing traditions about table fellowship and fasting. And already we see how this raises the anxiety and the wrath of the Pharisees.

An Illustration of Something Familiar

Sensing their frustration and agitation, Jesus does what He often does. Jesus tries to help them understand what He is about by using an illustration of something familiar, something they might see every day. Jesus says to them, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine will be lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Jesus uses an example here that would have been very familiar to his first century followers, but not necessarily familiar to us today. As one commentator writes, when we hear the word "wineskin," most of us think of a tear-shaped leather bota, or pouch, that is used to carry wine which you then squirt into your mouth. This is something some of us may associate with our younger days – I mean, watching others use them in our younger days of course! But, this is not what Jesus was referring to. In Jesus' time, wine was made by crushing grapes with bare feet on a wine press, which would sift out the skins and other debris.

The juice, called "must," would then be collected underneath in stone jars where the first step of fermentation would take place. The *must* was then strained through a cloth to remove any other sediment. Then it was poured into wineskins, which were actually whole tanned animal skins, often from a goat. The legs, tails, and head had been cut off the animal, and all but one of those openings were sealed closed. The *must* was poured into this whole skin where the wine would continue to ferment. The carbon dioxide, a by product of fermentation, would stretch the skins until the wine was ready in perhaps another two to four months.

So when Jesus talked about new wine and new wineskins, a lot of time and a lot of hard work would have gone into both. Jesus was new wine. But, the Pharisees were trying to put him into their old wineskins, and it wasn't working. Jesus was challenging the Pharisees to stretch their spiritual skins to allow something new to ferment. This was not an easy thing for them to do, for they were very devout and very devoted to life as they knew it. And, if we can be honest with one another this morning, this is not an easy thing for us to do as well. Change and growth and soul making takes a lot of time,

and a lot of hard work, and it can stretch us indeed.

But friends, Lent is a time for wine making, for soul making. Lent is a time to look at the possible new wine that God is ready to pour into our lives. It is a time to see what new thing God might want to ferment in the skins of our souls. What is this new thing for you? Is there something God is calling you to hold on to, or is there something God is calling you to let go of? Do you need to make a change in a job or a relationship? Do you need to look at the way you spend your time or your money? Do you need to look at the way you do your job? Is God calling you to take better care of yourself? Is God calling you to take better care of others? Do you need to forgive someone or do you need to be forgiven by someone? As delightful as new wine sounds, it can indeed take a lot of pressing and pouring and straining and fermenting.

And, friends, Lent is not only a time to look at new wine. It is also a time to examine the skins of our souls – to take a look at the state of our souls. As many of you know, I worked in nursing before I went to seminary. In nursing, when you examine a patient, you check the *turgor*, the health, of a patient's skin. Is the skin dehydrated? Is it dry? Is it swollen? Pulled too tight? Is it too thick or too thin? For the skin can reflect what is going on organically within a person. So, this morning I ask, what is the *turgor*, what is the health, of your soul? Are you dehydrated or dry? Do you need some living waters? Are you pulled too tight...too much stress? Do you need some relief? Has the skin on your soul become too thick or too thin? When we have been hurt or when we feel vulnerable, for some of us the skin on our souls becomes thick and tough, not allowing anyone or anything else to penetrate. When others of us have been hurt or feel vulnerable, the skin on our souls thins out, and even things that should not penetrate or hurt us – still do.

Personally, I've struggle much of my life with the latter – skin that is a little too thin. It's the kind of skin that can receive 100 positive comments and one negative one, and it is the negative comment which will penetrate. I would imagine some of you may know what I mean. And have you ever noticed that when you are a little thin-skinned, it seems to attract thick-skinned folks who have no idea of what they are saying to you!

A perfect example of this was something that happened to me while studying at Princeton Seminary. I decided to take Hebrew as an intensive course in the summer between my first and second year of seminary. There was a student, Bob, who sat in a seat behind me in the Hebrew Class, whom I did not know well. To help put this in context, you need to know that one afternoon I heard Bob speaking with a woman from our class as I was walking by. He said to her, "Did anyone ever tell

you that you looked like a young Katharine Hepburn?" Well, in some ways, she actually did, and she seemed to be quite pleased with his comment. The next day, after class, as we were getting up to leave the lecture hall, Bob stopped me. He said, "Jan, you know, I have been sitting behind you now for a couple of weeks. And did anyone ever tell you that from the back, you look like a perfect Labrador retriever?" Some of us have skins and are sensitive and easily hurt – which can make us afraid of new wine being poured into the skins of our souls.

Our Skin Is Meant to Grow and Change

But friends, whether the skins of our souls are thin or thick, dry or swollen, young or old, our skin is meant to grow and to change. And when this does not happen, it can have a tremendous impact on our lives. Five of the ten years I worked in nursing, I worked as a visiting nurse doing home care. One of the most poignant visits I ever made was to an older, retired woman who lived alone in her modest home. We had actually been asked to visit by friends from her church. They were afraid she was not doing well. She had slowed down, and was not getting out of her house very often. And she would not let anyone come in to visit or to lend a hand. As a matter of fact, when we first called, she did not want the nurses to come either. Finally, she agreed to have me visit.

When I arrived, she let me in the side door of her home. There was then just a path that we could follow through the dining room into the living room, for there were stacks of papers and boxes and cans and jars everywhere. We went into the living room. There was one seat cleared on the couch, and there was one open chair. As I sat down, I looked around the living room. And all I could see were dolls – hundreds and hundreds of dolls. They were everywhere – in cabinets, on shelves, on tables.

After we chatted for a while, I gently said, "Jean, please tell me about your dolls. When did you start to collect them?" And she said, "Well, when I was a little girl, my mother passed away. I was so sad. And my father was just overwhelmed. He could barely manage. He didn't have time for me. But, the lady next door gave me a gift. And when she gave it to me, it was a moment of pure joy, a bright spot in a very dark time. And the gift she gave me was a doll. And it felt so good." She paused and looked around the room, and then said, "I guess I have been buying dolls ever since trying to capture that good feeling again." My heart ached for the little girl still inside this dear woman who never had the love and care and support she needed to mend a broken heart.

In many ways, Jean's situation was extreme and com-

plex. And she grew up in a generation of those who pulled themselves up by their boot straps to take the next steps in life. But, then again, how many of us still try to fill the wounded and worried places in our own souls with work, or alcohol, or food, or sex, or shopping, or whatever it might be. Friends, it is good, and it is necessary, for the skins of our souls to stretch and to change and to grow. It is good, and it is necessary, for us to be open to new wine. It may not be easy, but it is good.

As I worked on this sermon for today, I could not help but think of the wineskins of this faith community. The wineskins that were unexpectedly punctured this year. As we said, change is hard – especially when the change is not of our choosing. And this year, we have been about the task of creating new wine and stretching new wineskins. As we know, it is not an easy thing to do.

But, I do believe with all of my heart, that the skins are still filled and fermenting. And I do believe with all of my heart that if Jesus was walking the streets of New York City today, he would be talking about a remarkable place on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 55th. A place where souls bend toward the sun. A place where light is reflected into the dark. A place where stories are shared and life is affirmed. A place where tables are set, tears are shared, and sorrows are divided. A place where songs are sung, hope is born, and all are welcomed.

We just need to keep doing our part, stretching those new wineskins for the new wine that God has for us in abundance. It is a time of wine making and soul making. But, then again... it is Lent. Thanks be to God, Amen!

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