

**A Sermon Preached by Guest Preacher, Stephen Lucas
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Several years ago, Robert Fulghum, who in addition to being a best-selling author, also counts among the many odd things he has done over the years the wonderful and at least of the surface, paradoxical combination of minister and bartender, wrote a book called “All I Ever Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten.” The book is an exposition of those simple rules that make life worth living, like...

“Leave the sandbox the way you found it, share what you have with your neighbor, and hold hands when crossing the street, or any other scary place for that matter.” Pretty good advice.

If I were given an assignment to write such a book, I would entitle it, “All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned on the Bike Challenge,” because it was on that three and a half week, 440 mile bike trip through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and North Carolina with 200 other high school kids that I learned the Bike Challenge version of “Hold hands while crossing the street,” which was, “If one of us walks, all of us walk.”

Three and a half weeks riding up and down The Blue Ridge Mountains on a bicycle is a long time, long enough that everyone in a riding group of 15 is bound to have a bad day. And we all had them. One day you’re blasting up the backside of a mountain like Lance Armstrong, at least in your mind you are, and the next day, just getting up out of your sleeping bag is a steep climb.

And so we had a rule.

The rule was if anyone in our riding group had to walk, everyone did. No leaving anyone behind, and no carping at the one who was sputtering, because just as sure as your did, it would be your turn to run out of gas.

My day came about a week in. We were doing a 63-mile day from Roanoke Mountain to a spot on the Blue Ridge Parkway called Smart View, and we hit an incline at about mile 40 that day when I did all I could to stay in the saddle, but I just couldn’t. The incline was too steep, and I had nothing left. My legs felt like jello.

You know, the old adage, “No hill for a climber,” is fun to toss out at the beginning of the day when you’re rested, but it’s not so handy when you hit the proverbial wall. And so we all got off and walked our bikes for about half a mile, when I got my second wind, and off we went again.

And I never will forget how I felt that day...embarrassed and grateful all at the same time.

Embarrassed because none of us like to admit our limitations, but grateful to my riding group that they didn't go off and leave me in the dust, or make me feel defective for slowing them down.

Now whether you have been on a bike challenge or some other test of physical endurance, you know what I'm talking about, because we all have times in our lives when we are worn out, worn down, overworked, overextended, put a fork in us, we're done. The frenetic pace of our lives and our schedules make burnout for all of us, not a possibility, but more like a probability, reminding us that the people Judith Viorst describes in her poem, "When Did I Stop Being 20 and Other Injustices," is us.

*I've finished six pillows in Needlepoint,
And I'm reading Jane Austen and Kant,
And I'm up to the pork with black beans in Advanced Chinese Cooking.
I don't have to struggle to find myself
For I already know what I want.
I want to be healthy and wise and extremely good-looking.*

*I'm learning new glazes in Pottery Class,
And I'm playing new chords in Guitar,
And in Yoga I'm starting to master the lotus position.
I don't have to ponder priorities
For I already know what they are:
To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.
And adored in addition.*

*I'm improving my serve with a tennis pro,
And I'm practicing verb forms in Greek,
And in Primal Scream Therapy all my frustration are vented.
I don't have to ask what I'm searching for
Since I already know that I seek
To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.
And adored.
And contented.*

*I've bloomed in Organic Gardening,
And in Consciousness Raising there's no one around who can top me.
And I'm working all day, and I'm working all night
To be good-looking, healthy, and wise.
And adored.
And contented.
And brave.
And well-read.
And a marvelous hostess,
Fantastic in bed,*

*And bilingual,
Athletic,
Artistic...
Won't someone please stop me?*

Now Viorst's poem is embarrassing because it is true.

While this poem may be a "tongue in cheek" caricature of her life and ours, the reason it stings is because there is enough truth in it to be more portrait than caricature, reminding us that we are split people with divided loyalties, torn between wanting to be Mother Teresa and Sarah Jessica Parker, Martin Luther King and Donald Trump, spiritual pilgrims with a heart of gold, but who still have the buns of steel. We want to have it all, see it all, taste it all, feel it all, do it all, and look good while we're doing it.

And so we push and push and push, and no wonder that at some point, when we least expect it, when we are at our most vulnerable, we break. Even if you're busy doing good things, good work, work that you deeply believe in, work that makes the world a better, more passionate and compassionate place, it's easy to go to the well one time too many, so that when you pull the bucket up, there's nothing in it but the loud clank of the dipper.

And this is why we need this story in John.
This is the reason I love this story in John.

It is an interesting story, and John is the only one who tells it. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, after Jesus is baptized, he goes off into the desert to do the hard work of reflection. But in John, he follows his baptism by partying...and not just any party, but a Jewish wedding party.

Now I mean no disrespect to fraternities when I say this, but a Saturday night keg party couldn't hold a candle to a Jewish wedding party. These things usually went on for about a week, and while I'm sure some guests brought their own coolers and coozies, the hosts were expected to ante up for the food and most of the wine.

And so Jesus and the disciples are at this party, when the wine runs out, leading some commentators to suggest that one of the reasons the wine gave out so early was because it was Jesus and the disciples who drank it up. For some of us, this sounds as strange as someone being a minister and a bar-tender, but Jesus was at the party, and it does seem that he was not shy about having a good time, given his reputation as a glutton and a wine-bibber.

Now John does not say, "The wine ran out," but instead he says, "When the wine ran out," implying that nothing lasts forever, not a party, and certainly not the wine. It was no surprise to John that the wine ran out, nor should it be to us.

But what is really interesting in this story has not to do with the wine, but this exchange between Mary and Jesus. John says that Jesus' mother goes to him, and if Jesus and the

boys had been enjoying the wine, I can just imagine her cutting her eyes at him with a withering glance that only a mother can give and saying, “The wine’s run out,” which was a mother’s code for “If the wine has run out, I have a sneaking suspicion that you boys had something to do with it.”

But regardless of why the wine had run out, whether Jesus and his friends had contributed to this problem, Mary knew her son could do something about it if he wanted to, which at first, it appears that he didn’t, responding to his mother with the words, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”

And then the most curious thing happens.

It appears she gave Jesus one more look, and then turns on her heels and instructs the servants, “Do what he tells you to do,” which was her way of saying, Young man, you may be the Messiah, but I’m still your mother. Do what I ask you to do!”

And what happens next?

The most curious of Jesus’ miracles, water to wine, leaving us to scratch our heads over what this story may mean.

I don’t know how many of you watch “The Sopranos.”

I must confess that when I first watched it, I thought it was simply “The Godfather” done for cable. But “The Sopranos” have become a cultural phenomenon, and have struck a nerve with viewers in ways “The Cosby’s” never did.

While “The Cosby’s” showed us who we are as we would like to be, and maybe, through the grace of God, sometimes are, “The Sopranos” show us our dark sides, the sides that we all have, whether we admit it or not. When we look at Tony and Carmelo Soprano, we see ourselves, people who, while have made moral compromises with themselves and each other to chase after a lifestyle, rather than to have a life, and in the end, find that it does not satisfy.

In his book, “The Gospel According to Tony Soprano, Chris Seay has said,

Tony is a modern day reflection of an ancient king, Solomon.

King Solomon, ruler of Israel circa 900 B.C., is quite possibly the most shocking of God’s chosen leaders in the Bible, a book that is filled with the kind of deviant people who make up the Soprano crew. He is the son of King David and the godfather of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures describe him as the richest and wisest man to ever live. He ruled all, demonstrated astounding wisdom, wrote beautiful songs, and was loved by God. However, in spite of this divine favor, Solomon spent his life in search for meaning apart from God. He lived life in full pursuit of money, fame, and pleasure. His journey led him to accumulate great knowledge, build magnificent houses and vineyards, pursue sexual pleasure with a thousand of his closest friends, and become rich and powerful beyond measure.

Yet all attempts at gratification end in vain. They are empty and soon take more than they give. “It is meaningless,” Solomon said. “A chasing after the wind.”

Tony, like his biblical counterpart, is overwhelmed with a sense of meaninglessness. He has accumulated great wealth and power, yet feels poor and weak. He oversees an army of men who are committed to him and his cause (some more than others), yet feels alone and abandoned. He denies himself nothing, yet continues to live in emptiness and despair. He has money. Power. Strength. Influence. Success. With these things, however, he still cannot escape a life of depression, medication, instability, and alienation.

And we are not so much unlike Tony and Carmelo Soprano than we may think. Tony and Carmelo may indeed be caricatures of us, but there is enough portraits there to sting.

Like Tony we fill up on things and find ourselves running on empty.
Like Carmelo, we compromise our values for a lifestyle that is comfortable.
And when we live in this way, it doesn't take long for the wine to run out.

Blaise Pascal has said, “The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is above all that which prevents us thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction. (For if we were) bored, and boredom would drive us to seek some more solid means of escape, but diversion passes our time and brings us imperceptibly to death.”

This is what human beings typically do when the wine runs out. We distract ourselves from any time we could spend alone, in reflection, in study, in soul searching, in prayer, using pleasure as a way to escape the pain of a broken life. And it becomes a vicious circle, like trying to quench your thirst by drinking salt water.

And so the \$64,000 question is not, “Will the wine run out?” because the wine always runs out.

If we live long enough, we will all come to a moment like the apostle Paul, where we feel utterly incapable of doing what we believe in, what we hope for, that which we are committed to, doing what we do not want to do, and being unable to do that which we would.

In those moments, we learn that what John Claypool said is right, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” The wine has run out.

And I not preaching at you when I say this, but speaking in a confessional way as well.

We weary of doing good, we hit the wall and experience compassion fatigue.
The wine has run out.

Or we come to those moments in our marriages where loving each other is more work than play, experiencing marital fatigue.
The wine has run out.

Our work leaves feeling empty, bored, or defeated, rather than engaged and alive, and we experience vocational burnout.
The wine has run out.

Again, the question is not will the wine run out, but “What will we do when it does?”

It was this question about what to do when the wine runs out that Mary and Jesus were having a small scene over that day at the wedding party, and when she whipped around and instructed the servants, “Do what he tells you!” whether she knew it or not, the mother of Jesus gave us the answer to our question.

When the wine runs out, do what?
It’s so simple that it is beautiful.
Do what Jesus tells you to do.
And what is that?

He tells us to pray.
He tells us to love.
He tells us to serve.

He tells us to take care of each other, to forgive each other, to nurture each other, to sustain each other, to be kind and considerate of one another, and to stand with those whom the world, and sadly a great many Christians exclude, as we seek to change the hearts and minds of those whose approach to Christianity could be called “Condemnatory Christianity, not by the force of our argument, but by loving them, even when they hate us.

Again, this is another way of saying, leave the sandbox the way you found it, share what you have with each other, and hold hands when crossing over the scary, dangerous and vulnerable places in your life.

I once heard Carlyle Marney say, “There is no exhaustion, complete exhaustion in community.” And I think he was right.

What does this mean for us today?

It means that you don’t leave the party when the wine has run out. Remember, if one of us walks, all of us walk.

You see, it’s not the worst thing in the world to run out of wine every so often, for if this leads us to turn to Christ and to each other a little more often, opening us to each other a little more often, causing us to be a little bit more humble, a little bit more honest, a little

bit more interdependent and interconnected, then that is not a bad thing. Like me, you may at first feel embarrassed when you can't go another step by yourself, but the gratitude that washes over you when someone stops to walk a mile with you in your shoes, outdistances that embarrassment by a country mile.

For if Jesus could take up a towel, wrap it around his waist and wash our feet with it, then the least each one of us can do is bring to each other the wine of support, understanding, empathy love, inclusion, hope and community in those awful moments when our wine has run out.

There is an old Nigerian folk tale...

The tale tells of how the tribal chief sent out his messengers to invite all of the people of the tribe to a great feast. "All of the food will be provided," they announced, "but each family must bring one jug of palm wine." One of the men of the tribe, Ezra, wanted to attend the great festival very much, but he had no wine. He paced the floor trying to think of a solution for his dilemma. Finally his wife suggested, "You could buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive for such a great occasion." "How foolish," Ezra cried, "to spend money when there is a way to go free." Once again he paced until he came upon a plan. "Rather than wine I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred men will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great pot of wine?"

On the day of the feast the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, reminding the people of the great festival. All of the people came dressed in their finest clothes, gathering by midmorning at the home of the chief. As each man entered the tribal ground, he poured his jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Ezra carefully poured the contents of his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers.

When all of the guests had arrived, the chief commanded the music to cease and ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. As the chief spoke the opening words of the festival, all of the guests raised their glasses and drank. Suddenly a cry of disbelief arose from the crowd, and they quickly drank again. What they tasted was not wine, but water. It seems each guest had decided that his one jug of water could not spoil the great pot of palm wine.

The first thing we learn in kindergarten is to share what we have with others, and it is the first lesson we forget as adults. Someone once said, "All sin is rooted in the suspicion that God is not very good," and if that is right, and I suspect it is, then this story in John is not just a happy story about how Jesus saved a party.

It is a Resurrection story, reminding us that when our wine runs out and we are on our last leg, Jesus is the One who keeps throwing parties and issuing invitations, where the wine that is served is always the best wine, for it is the sweet communion wine of forgiveness and grace. And when we drink this wine, like all good wine, it causes us to lose our inhibitions and our fears, and in that moment we repent of the sin of turning the

wine of community into the waters of selfishness, we stop withholding what we have out of fear, and we lean back in the confident assurance that with Jesus the wine never runs out.

Tom Lane asks, “If Jesus could transform common water into wedding wine, spit and dirt into new sight, troubled sea into pathway, well water into living water...could Christ transform the waters of my life, shallow, murky, polluted, stagnant, sour, into a shower of blessing?”

Could it be?

Amen.