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Yates

Rev. Frank

NEW WINE

John 2:1-11

Jesus and his disciples attend a wedding in Cana, not far from his boyhood home of Nazareth. Jesus' mother informs him that the partygoers have finished off the wine. After initially resisting her implied request, Jesus then instructs the servants to fill with water six stone jars containing some twenty or more gallons. For those of you keeping score, that would total between 120 and 180 gallons! Well, you know the rest of the story. The water is miraculously turned into wine, the best vintage imaginable. John tells us that this amazing transformation revealed the glory of God to Jesus' disciples and they believed.

John would have us understand that the best wine has been saved for last. Jesus offers something utterly new and fresh in this crucial turning point in history. The stone jars used for Jewish purification rituals now contain new wine. The Messianic hope was that in the last days God would provide lavishly for the people, a feast of good food and fine wine. Jesus' inaugural miracle at Cana signaled that God keeps those promises. Spread before those surprised and delighted wedding guests at Cana was a foretaste of that Messianic banquet. Jesus has filled the old with the new; the ancient jars of purification have now become the wine vats of the promised Messianic kingdom.

Throughout the mission of the church, new and surprising twists and turns have brought the Good News of Jesus Christ to every generation. Within a few years of Jesus' resurrection, the early church moved from being a Jewish sect into a community welcoming both Jews and Gentiles. If ever there were new wine poured into ancient jars, surely that was it. What an astonishing change in the make-up of God's people! Ancient

enemies become friends in Christ. That same new wine continues to be poured into old forms and ancient ways even to this day.

In my lifetime and in the lifetime of all of us here today, we have seen new wine poured into the old forms of racial prejudice. This is a turn of events every bit as surprising as those early days of the church when Jew and Gentile ate together and worshipped together. That new wine appeared again dramatically in 1955 when Rosa Parks started a revolution, a peaceful revolution, in Montgomery, Alabama. She refused to leave the “whites only” section at the front of her city bus. Her arrest catapulted Dr. Martin Luther King into the forefront of what became known as the Civil Rights Movement. This truly was new wine in what had become hardened stone jars of prejudice and injustice.

When Rosa Parks refused to get up, I was seven years old living in the segregated Old South in East Texas. There was a lot of un-learning I and thousands of other Southerners needed to undergo. I remember well the anxiety and upheaval, but am I ever glad and thankful for that new wine! We are a better nation because of what Dr King and the civil rights movement brought us. There is so much more yet to be done, but thanks be to God for the gift of new wine Dr. King and his followers gave us.

It is a fascinating tale how Dr. King came to believe that non-violent resistance was the best tactic for his movement. While a student at Crozer Seminary, he read widely in history and philosophy. His own experience and the lessons of history indicated that force and brutality seem to rule in human affairs. And the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche proved to be equally troubling with its attack on Christian love as well as its exalting of the “will to power”. Though King remained committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he began to wonder if Jesus’ teachings could ever challenge the ingrained prejudice and injustice facing his people.

Then King went to a lecture in Philadelphia given by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University. Johnson had spent fifty days in India studying the life and teachings of Gandhi. The lecture explained how Gandhi had forged “Soul Force”, the power of love and truth, into a social force for change. Johnson insisted that Gandhi’s tactics which gained India’s independence from Britain could work to bring freedom for African-Americans in our country. Gandhi’s non-violent resistance should be imported to America-that was Johnson’s proposal. The young student

Martin Luther King sat spellbound. He left the meeting electrified and then rushed to buy half a dozen books on Gandhi.

What King discovered was that Gandhi had first to fight the demons within his own life, he the hot tempered young lawyer who once threw his own wife out of his house in a fit of rage. By meditation and prayer Gandhi became committed to non-violence in his own life and in the life of his nation. Using non-violent resistance, Gandhi forged a movement within India that refused to cooperate with evil and injustice.

King became convinced that as a Christian he needed to purge his own life of violent tendencies and then use Gandhi's tactics to purge the nation of violent oppression and injustice. King rejoiced that Christ had furnished him with the spirit; now Gandhi had showed him how it could work not just in interpersonal relationships, but in dealing with groups within society. In other words, Jesus brought the new wine of God's love, Gandhi, the jar of non-violent resistance. What a transformation that miraculous combination wrought in our country!

In 1959 Dr. King and his wife Coretta visited India, seeing Prime Minister Nehru and other close followers of Gandhi. Although he was shocked at the sheer weight of poverty and destitution in the land, he was also amazed at the friendly relations between Indians and people of British descent. The non-violent revolution opened the door to fellowship and friendship between those who came to build an empire and those who had been colonized. Also, King was much impressed by the way Gandhi had reached out to the so-called "untouchables" and called them "children of God." King thought to himself, "If this can happen in India, surely it can happen eventually in America."

But King was not blind to the challenges confronting non-violent resistance. King once noted, "Gandhi never had more than one hundred persons absolutely committed to his philosophy of non-violence. But with this small group of devoted followers, he galvanized the whole of India and won freedom for his people." King always understood that the anger and resentment of an oppressed people could easily spill out into violence and chaos. But King and his closest followers always insisted upon non-violence in their movement's tactics.

And King was not unaware of the criticism of his methods. Many noted that India and America presented quite different challenges. Gandhi

led a vast majority of disaffected people in India, while King led a distinct minority of African-Americans here. Malcolm X famously noted this distinction: “Gandhi was a big dark elephant sitting on a little white mouse. King is a little black mouse sitting on top of a big white elephant.”

Nor was King blind to the sacrifices required in non-violent resistance. King often spoke of the death of Jesus at the hand of violent persecutors. And while in India, King laid a wreath at the tomb of Gandhi, who himself was assassinated in 1948. As we all know, King also fell victim to an assassin’s bullet in 1968. Non-violent resistance at first brings a violent response, because the oppressor seldom lets go of power willingly. But King and Gandhi firmly believed that over time both the oppressed and the oppressor would be transformed by love and non-violent resistance.

That is the deepest conviction that King held—non-violent resistance can transform the world. As King once said, “We will return good for evil; Christ showed us the way and Gandhi showed us it could work.” And it has and we are all the better for it. The new wine of Christ’s love, even love for one’s enemy, has been poured into the jar of non-violent resistance. This brought a miracle in our time. And this miraculous combination still holds promise for the future. Deep in my heart I really do believe that. I really do. Amen.