

Sermon for 2 after Epiphany, Year C
Jan. 16, 2022
St. John's, Gloucester
M. Lise Hildebrandt

Today's lesson is about emptiness.

The Gospel story is only found in John. It shows Jesus, early in his ministry, doing a private little domestic miracle. This miracle cements the brand new disciples' understanding that Jesus is God's chosen one. It happens because of emptiness.

After Jesus is baptized by John at the Jordan River in the South and then calls some disciples, Jesus zips up to Cana near home. This was probably a family wedding, which is why Mary was there and Jesus shows up. Weddings were lavish affairs lasting days and involving the whole town. They were expressions of hospitality—one was expected to provide food and wine, feasting and dancing for all. To fail to do so would be a social catastrophe. But wine is not just a party drink—it is deeply interwoven with Jewish faith and culture. Wine symbolized joy and God's abundance. It is used to mark the beginning and end of Sabbath, the time of rest and rejoicing in God's presence. It is shared between bride and groom to symbolize the beginning of the marriage. It was in this context that Mary notices that the wine has run out before the party has. Running out a wine was a hospitality disaster for the wedding families and could symbolize the lack of God's presence.

So Mary comes to Jesus and tells him, "They have no more wine." The wine jars are empty. He knows what she is asking, and he is not thrilled about it. "Mother, what concern of ours is this? It's not time for me to act publicly." But Mary is not deterred. She tells the servants to follow Jesus' instructions. And so he has them fill up 6 large stone jars with water and turns it into 150 gallons of wine. And it was not just 2 Buck Chuck or Wine in a Box, it was awesomely wonderful wine. Thus, Jesus reveals himself to those standing near. A huge tiny miracle, seen only by Mary, the servants, and the disciples who were there with Jesus. The steward didn't see it, the bride and bridegroom never knew, the guests were oblivious. But there it was. From emptiness to an abundance--rich, joyful, God-filled. Pointing to God's power in Jesus.

We don't like emptiness. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum, but modern Americans do even more. We overeat so we don't have to feel hungry, we get into relationships so we don't have to be alone, we fill our lives and houses with stuff so that . . . well, why **do** we do that? I guess because emptiness is scary. Being alone is scary. Not having answers or security is scary.

But we can't be transformed if we are full up, overflowing with stuff and busyness and self-importance and worry. These all act as barriers between ourselves and others, between ourselves and our souls, between ourselves and God.

One of the great challenges and opportunities of growing older is to empty out and let go. If we don't do it voluntarily, we'll probably have it foisted upon us by illness or injury. After decades of collecting stuff—furniture and books and clothing and appliances—maybe you decide to move to a smaller space. You can't take it all with you.

You have to pass it on, donate it or throw a bunch of it away. It's hard and exhausting, physically and emotionally, which is why so many people don't do it. But if you **DO** do it, you're going to feel about ten thousand pounds lighter. You may occasionally miss this or that thing, but I've never heard anyone say, "Wow! I WISH I had kept all that heavy furniture and hundred boxes of stuff."

Instead, I've heard people wish they had done this sooner, and excited about the room they have in their living spaces and lives for something new.

And growing older is a chance to live with the reality that as time goes on, we can't do what we did before, or we realize that we choose to give up some activities. I was walking in the neighborhood park and listening to the sound of people skating on the pond. I thought, "I need to get my skates sharpened so I can skate." And then I thought, "I'm recovering from a pinched nerve in my back, so maybe not." Maybe later . . . or maybe not. It's sad. But then there are many other things I'd like to do in my life that I never have—quilting and pottery and maybe salsa dancing. And there are ways that aging can open us to knowing our need of others, and being OK with that. You know, like, asking for help or living in a community!!

And it's a way to recognize the power that we have and to use it. What will our legacy be? How can we pass on the gifts of our life, the things we no longer need or want, in order to support life and change in the future?

Our lives in the last several years have had more emptiness than normal—the time two years ago when everything shut down and we had to do without in person meetings and worship and traveling. The life celebrations that we have missed or had to do virtually. The loss of routines and relationships. The on-going upheavals that mean we live without a sense of security.

We are invited to sit with emptiness. To accept it. To allow ourselves to be empty. To let the wine jars be unfilled for a while. In most parts of life, there are worse things than emptiness. To be in an abusive relationship is worse than having no relationship. To be in a job that sucks the life and spirit out of us may be worse than not having a job or having a job that doesn't pay as much. Not having a lot of things may allow us to cherish what we have or build relationships of sharing.

Emptiness is an invitation to change, to move towards something new. If you immediately go and try to fill that void, we may miss an opportunity to be open, to wait, to see what happens. And it is a lot easier to move if you are empty than full, a lot easier to travel with two suitcases than 8 rooms full of furniture.

I give you permission to lay down the things and activities that feel like a burden. I also give you permission to initiate new things that feed your soul or give you energy or move into the community.

But we won't know about what these are unless we sit with the emptiness. In the quiet, in the stillness, the deep wisdom from within can bubble up. Jesus, come to pour in new wine, better than the old. In our own little domestic miracle, Jesus comes to us. If we trust, if we wait, if we sit with the emptiness in confidence that our God does indeed want to fill us up with joy.

I invite you into emptiness. I invite you into a practice—whether you call it meditation or centering prayer, which is part of Christian tradition—you are invited to spend a few minutes watching your breath. Let's do this now. Sit comfortably, feet on floor. Close your eyes. With your mind, observe your breath. As it goes in. As it comes out. Just focus on the breath. When your mind wanders off or starts racing, just gently return to watching to breath. Allow yourself to relax. Feel your face and jaw and shoulders relax. Watch your breath.

(Pause)

This little practice can help calm us, can help us live with emptiness. It opens us to God's divine wisdom and joy, which we can't possibly hear when we are racing around doing stuff at 100 miles an hour.

I know some of what you all are carrying in your personal lives. I know something of the challenges this church faces. I also know that the more we ground ourselves in quiet, in emptiness, in prayer, the more the divine wisdom, the wine of joy, delightful change will come to us. We know our need of God. That is a precious thing.

I will close with a poem that was sent to me on a Christmas card:

If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things
and again with things,
if we consider ourselves so unimportant
that we must fill every moment
of our lives with action,
when will we have time to make the long slow
journey across the desert as did the magi?
Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds?
Or brood over the coming of the child
as did Mary?
For each one of us there is a desert to travel,
a star to discover,
and a being within ourselves
to bring to life.

---Author unknown. Let us pray. AMEN.