

God's Sommelier

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

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Isaiah 62:1-5/John 2:1-11

This is one of those things that probably needs no confession, but I grew up in a small, hick town in South Georgia. We ate most of our meals at the kitchen table and I don't think I recall a wine glass ever making its way to that table.

Like many of you, though, I was wise enough to marry above my station, and Bill taught me about the finer things of life, particularly when it came to wine. He went through a rigorous program to become a sommelier. Until he became one, I'm not sure I even knew what the word means. Although it was not how he made his living, it became his passion. So, most years, we went to the California wine country for his birthday, which coincided with harvest time. On one trip, probably 30 years ago, I learned one of the most important lessons of life.



We took a VIP tour of the Korbel Winery. Although we subsequently discovered much better sparkling wines, it was a fascinating tour because Korbel is one of the world's largest producers of sparkling wine in the world. At the end of this behind-the-scenes tour, we went to the board room where we sampled eight different types of champagne. After sampling so many, I don't really remember a whole lot about the tour, but a couple of things did impress me.

When I was a little boy, I remember taking a sip of wine from an adult's glass. I thought it was the vilest stuff I had ever tasted. A few days later I was watching TV and I understood **why** it was so awful:



One day shortly after that, I saw someone in a restaurant hold a glass of wine up to the light, and I was certain they were looking for toenails.

Eventually, though, I learned how wine is really made, and this became a powerful parable about life. You see, the juice from which fine wine is made is extracted from grapes with great gentleness. What sometimes is called "free run" is done almost entirely by gravity and the weight of the grapes.



In other words, the best wine is made from the juice that the grapes give up freely. The next press uses a bit of pressure to extract the juice and produces a wine of slightly lesser quality because the grapes were bruised and pressured by the process. Grapes may go through several pressings, but, in the final press, the grapes are completely crushed into pulp, removing all the moisture. The result of what is taken from the final press is used to make commercial vinegar.

That day, all those years ago, even after sampling eight types of champagne, I knew I had learned a powerful parable about life.

It is risky to push any parable too far, but, time and again, all of us have witnessed lives that are graceful, generous, kind, openhanded, philanthropic, and munificent. From those lives, God seems to make champagne, bubbly, effervescent, and joyful. The burdens of everyone they touch seem lighter. Their gracious, generous, and open spirits are powerfully transformative. They are the people we want to spend our lives around, secretly hoping their munificence might rub off on us.

Of course, we also know people who are cynical, petty, miserly, bitter and begrudging; people for whom the word “whine” is spelled with an “H.” All God can make of them is vinegar.

I know vinegar serves a purpose, but I also know you don't need much of it. Too many Christians seem to feel called to be the vinegar of life, closed-minded, difficult and judgmental, tight-fisted and embittered, without empathy. I often work with churches that are like that, where it is all about them.



In Luke's version of Jesus' sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

Give and it shall be given unto you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over it will be poured into your lap; for with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Luke 6:38

It is an irrefutable spiritual law that the hand that is open to give is also open to receive. The life that is open, generous, and sharing is also open to life's blessings,

and the church that is an open, trusting, generous host is also open to God's presence.

We are called to be God's champagne, bursting with a life that is eternal in quality, not vinegar miserly begrudging our time, money, and gifts. To see that one only has to look at the life of Jesus. Notice he didn't begin his ministry at meeting, or a book burning, or a moral inquisition, but at a party. His first miracle wasn't turning a gay person straight, or a fundamentalist into a liberal. Jesus began his ministry at a party, turning water into wine.



Mark Twain said, "No wonder people were always inviting Jesus to parties." That is a very different picture of Jesus from the one with which many of us were raised.



Notice that the Gospel reports that Jesus didn't just turn a little water into Welch's grape juice. The Gospel says that there were six stone water pots, each holding between 20 and 30 gallons, and according to the Gospel they filled them to the brim.

That is 120 to 180 gallons of wine. Measured another way, that's almost 4,000 five-ounce glasses of wine. God loves people who refuse to do things half way! Notice also that it wasn't simply 4,000 glasses of wine; it was the BEST wine.

Jesus was God's sommelier. The point of this miracle is often missed, but Jesus did not come not to condemn us. Jesus came to celebrate us and transform us, like water into wine. It is never too late.

Jesus came to show us that Divine Life is always flowing toward us, freely and gracefully. God has poured gifts into our lives that we have not even begun to recognize; spiritual gifts that flow through us as channels of divine presence and grace in the world.

Notice I said “**channels**,” not “**reservoirs**.” When we try to grasp life, cling to it, save it only for ourselves or our own, our lives turn to vinegar, and we’ve seen too much of that type of Christianity.

The irony of how Jesus was brutalized at the end was that no one needed to crush life from him. Every time someone reached out, blessings and life flowed from him to them. He was never tight-fisted or miserly, but joyously, generously munificent, giving his best and, ultimately, giving his all.

Hanna was the oldest person in the village. For generations, she helped mothers give birth, cared for the sick, and shared with those in need. She taught the young girls how to weave baskets so well they would hold water. The entire village was indebted to her.



For her 100th birthday, the village held a great feast to honor Hanna. Each person was asked to bring a flask of their finest wine, which they would blend in a great barrel to share as a symbol of how Hanna had so freely shared her best with all of them.

When the time came to toast Hanna, slowly, and with great effort, she rose to her feet. The leader of the village first dipped Hanna's cup into the wine, but, to everyone's shock, it was nothing but water. Everyone assumed that, in a huge barrel like that, no one would notice if the flask they brought contained only

water rather than wine. As a result, of course, they missed the joy of generosity and wounded one who had loved them since the day they were born.

Tomorrow, our nation will celebrate the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a sermon he preached at the National Cathedral in Washington, Dr. King said:

An individual has not started to live until they rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verbs agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know the second law of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace; a soul generated by love and a willingness to give your very life in service to others.



Jesus was the best example of that ever to live. He served and he served with great munificence and joy.

Dr. King preached that sermon on March 31, 1968. Three days later, he was dead. He didn't die when his Lexus crashed or in a fire trapped behind burglar bars designed to protect all he'd accumulated. Dr. King died fighting for garbage collectors in Memphis, Tennessee.

From his life, God made champagne, not vinegar. What can God make of yours?

At the wedding feast that day, everyone would have understood if Jesus had said that he was saving himself for greater needs. That isn't what happened, though. Instead:

Jesus did **what** he could.

Jesus did **all** that he could.

Jesus did the **best** that he could.

Because, like any good sommelier, Jesus knew that the best of life is made from what is freely given and vinegar is made from what has to be squeezed from a miser.

So, my friends, in the words of the emcee in "La Cage aux Folles":



Amen.