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Transformed Disappointments

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I know a man who was disappointed with himself as a father. He felt he yelled at his children too often because he could get away with it. He felt he was too often impatient with them and with himself.

I know of parents who were disappointed with their daughter because she chose to answer God's call to the priesthood when they were firmly against the ordination of women.

I know of a father who was disappointed that his first born child is a girl, not the boy he had so badly wanted.

This week a friend of mine lost his job, which is a big disappointment for him and his wife.

Many friends and colleagues have been disappointed by the news out of Canterbury, England, where the Primates, the heads of Anglican Churches around the world met this week. The news is the Primates decided to limit the involvement of the Episcopal Church in certain decision making activities in the Anglican Council. The Anglican Council does the work of the Anglican Communion, which is comprised of all the Anglican Churches in the world, including the Episcopal Church. I know I've thrown a lot of terms at you, and in the interest of keeping this sermon from getting too long, if you want to know more about what the Anglican Communion is, you can easily find out by googling the term or by following the links on the Good Shepherd website or the Diocese of Southern Ohio website. My point is many Episcopalians are feeling disappointed and hurt by the decision of the leaders of the Anglican churches to exclude our church from a few aspects of the Anglican Communion.

It seems, for more than a few people, this has been a week of disappointments. Perhaps that is why I couldn't help but sense a feeling of disappointment at the wedding in a place called Cana we just heard about in our Gospel reading this morning. This event is unique to John's Gospel, none of the other Gospels mention it, and the author of John appears to fill this story with many rich images.

It all starts with a wedding, which is certainly a joyful event, a happy occasion, a celebration, and for a village in Jesus' day it was also a rest from routines and work. In Jesus' day weddings were celebrations that would have gone on for more than just one day. This particular wedding, however, had a problem. The wine ran out.

It might just be the biggest fear of anyone planning and hosting a large event involving food: the fear that there won't be enough to eat or drink. The fear of running out. At this wedding in Cana we are confronted with this problem and the disappointment it brings.

Today we also might do well to remember we are in John's Gospel, and the author of John might be trying to tell us something deeper than a story where Jesus was the hero who saved a newly married couple from social disgrace and kept the party going. John might be trying to tell us something about those disappointing times in life when we are confronted with events that didn't turn out the way we wanted, or when we experience feelings of not having enough or not being worthy or good enough, when what we've been depending on runs out.

Jesus found out the wine ran out from his mother. While we might see the exchange between Jesus and his mother as bordering on disrespectful at first glance, scholars tell us that was not the intent. It is Jesus' mother who brings the awareness that the wine is all gone to Jesus' attention. Wine here may not be only literal drink, wine in the Old Testament was symbolic of joy. Joy in the Bible isn't a feeling of intense happiness, joy represented being in the Presence of God. Joy wasn't

necessarily connected with feeling happy as much as it was an awareness of the presence and action of God. Telling Jesus the wine is gone may not be a matter of catering, it could be seen as a spiritual message: the joy is gone out of the occasion, and out of life itself, people are feeling empty, disconnected from the holy.

That might explain Jesus odd sounding question of asking what that has to do with him, and the comment about his hour not yet arriving. It could be the author's way of telling us who Jesus is and what Jesus was sent to do. Jesus wasn't sent to fill everyone's wine glass or buffet plate. Jesus was sent to respond to a deeper disappointment of feeling disconnected from God.

Which might explain why Jesus turned to the empty water jugs. These jugs were not for holding drinking water, they were for holding water for the Jewish purification rites; rituals intended to symbolically wash away sin from a person, making them acceptable to God once again. Those jugs represented a relationship with God based on the notion God was looking down on God's people with disappointment, because the people were unable to follow God's rules, and so had to prayerfully wash as a way to show their desire to please God. It is interesting these jugs were empty; the water like the wine, had also run out. Not only was there no joy left, there was also no way to wash away the sin separating people from God.

There was a lot of disappointment at this wedding. And so much emptiness.

Jesus didn't let the emptiness remain. His first task was to direct the servants to fill the jugs. We heard these were large jugs, and these were the days long before indoor plumbing, so water had to be carried to those jugs from somewhere. It had to take time, and when they were full, that is when Jesus' time had come, and the water in the jugs was transformed into wine. Not just any wine, we heard the steward say, but the best of the best.

Perhaps Jesus had transformed more than just water into wine. If this is a story about who Jesus really is, the having the jugs filled with water was a way to symbolize that Jesus fulfilled the law of the Old Testament. When Jesus transformed water that would otherwise have been designated for purification, for making someone right with God, into the symbol of joy in being in the presence of God, Jesus was showing what he had come to do: to restore God's people into a close relationship with God. Jesus transformed the notion that God is far away and disappointed in us to the truth that God is here and God loves us and that means we can receive the deep, rich, satisfying, joyful love of God and we can live that love.

There have been critics who look at the story of Jesus' turning water into wine and asked why Jesus didn't magically make enough food for all the starving people in the world. Perhaps that criticism misses the point: this part of John's Gospel isn't about filling physical bellies, it is about how Jesus heals the separation between us and God which makes possible so many other transformations.

Like the man who felt disappointed in his parenting; who by a long process of self-awareness, prayer, support, learning, and forgiveness has transformed into a more self-aware parent who learns from mistakes instead of beating himself up and now works on the relationship between him and his children instead of trying to be the perfect father. His disappointment has been transformed to a deeper love and respect for his children.

The parents of the woman who was ordained a priest found their disappointment transformed into a deeper faith in God when they decided to support their daughter. Today they have changed their views on the ordination of women, and in so doing they found they have a deeper understanding of God and the church, too. The father who was at first disappointed that his first born child is a girl loves and accepted her and found his disappointment transformed into an

appreciation for a daughter who enjoys activities like fishing just as much as he does. He also found a new respect for women, and their involvement in workplaces. These transformations were not quick and easy, they took a significant amount of time, prayer and intention. The point is, they are real, and they happened.

Perhaps our Gospel today can be a deep message of hope for those facing disappointments like job loss and the decision by the Primates. The hope that in the face of disappointment transformation is possible. Transformation that comes from more than just following the rules of faith; praying, reading the Bible, attending worship; but comes from receiving and living the love of God. Love that may not have easy answers or quick fixes, but is there with us as we live through our disappointments. Love that shows us what we do have, and love that sees new possibilities and connections. Love that keeps following Christ despite disappointments, and looks for ways to transform them into God's love expressed in our choices, in our actions, and in our words.

This week there may have been people reminded that life will sometimes hand us disappointments. That's part of life. For all of us, our Gospel today reminds us Jesus transformed emptiness into the fullness of God's Love, which means disappointments no longer point to an end. Jesus has transformed them into reminders that nothing ever really ends. Instead things change. This can give us hope that any disappointment can be transformed into powerful expressions of God's love present with us here and now.