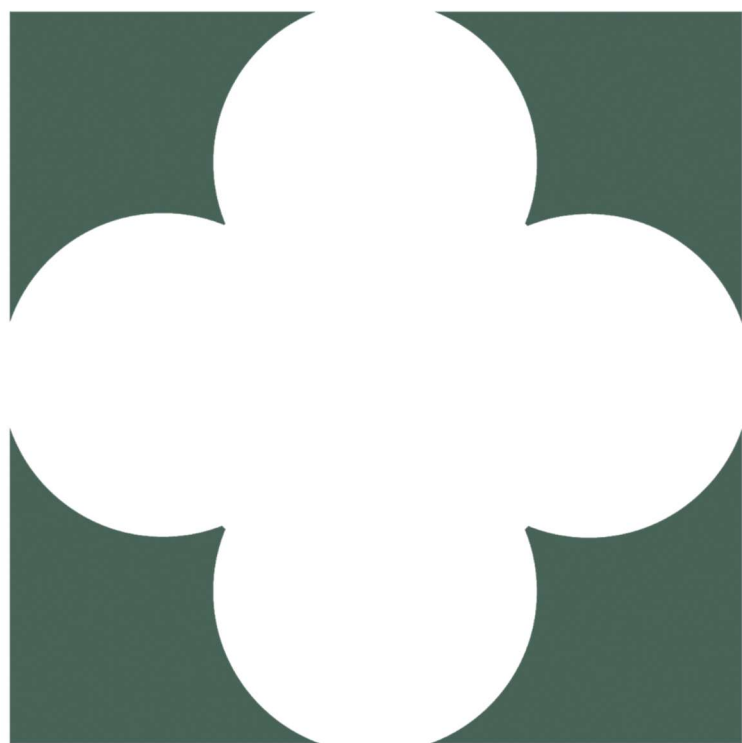


# The Best Is Yet to Be

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Song of Songs 4.9-15 (8.6)  
John 2.1-12

*(Dick Steele sings, "Imagine," by John Lennon)*

It's tempting to spend these last few minutes together reminding you of things I have said – not because I said them but because I believe them about you.

Like, "there is a power already at work within you that is able to accomplish far more than any of you can ask or *imagine*."

I'm long past the days of memorizing Bible verses. I'm long past memorizing almost anything. But I would love for you to hold these words from Ephesians 3.20 in your heart; that you would remember these words and perhaps recite them to yourselves as you stand at the mirror in the morning: "there is a power already at work within *you* that is able to accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine."

As that prayer honoring the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero says:

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete ...  
This is what we are about -  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise ...  
We may never see the end results ...  
We are workers, not master builders;  
ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.*

You will never fully see what your life has accomplished. You will never know all the ways your life has touched people or changed the world. Whatever thanks you get, it is only a small window into the gratitude that goes unexpressed for all that you are.

Because "there is a power already at work within you that is able to accomplish *far more than you can ask or imagine*."

And this is one of those times when "you" is both individual and plural. So, when you gather for worship and you look around, I hope the words of Ephesians 3.20 come to mind.

*Now you may say that I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one*

*I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one.*

It is hard to imagine what possessed John to begin his story of Jesus so completely different from all the other gospels. There are no birth stories, no angelic announcements, not even the temptation. John shoots right past all of that to Jesus being baptized, calling his disciples, and then on to his first act of ministry at a wedding in Cana:

### **John 2:1-12**

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup>When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' <sup>4</sup>And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' <sup>5</sup>His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' <sup>6</sup>Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup>He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. <sup>9</sup>When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom <sup>10</sup>and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' <sup>11</sup>Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. <sup>12</sup> After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.*

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

No doubt John has his reasons for telling this story first. After all, it's a wedding – people are beginning a new life together. And Jesus is beginning a new life together with his disciples.

But today as I read this story, I'm thinking about how hard it is to say goodbye at a wedding. No matter how much celebrating we do, we know that when we leave the party, life will look different. A new family will be created. Current family relationships will change and perhaps get more complicated. The people we may have not seen in years will go home.

And I can imagine that it must have been hard to say goodbye at this particular wedding because the guests drank all the wine and they were still sticking around. Which created a crisis until Jesus' mother steps in and prevails on Jesus to fix it.

If this is the way John begins his story, it should be no surprise that it takes him 4 whole chapters for Jesus to say goodbye to his disciples. One fifth of the gospel of John is Jesus saying goodbye.

And goodbyes are difficult. Goodbyes are especially difficult in these pandemic times. Goodbyes are particularly hard when you can't imagine what comes next.

That's why it is so important to remember: "there is a power already at work within you that is able to accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine."

That brings me to the part of the story where the best wine is served last. The miracle isn't just that water gets turned into wine. It's that it upends people's expectations. You serve the good wine first. And then the bad wine when everyone is sufficiently drunk not to notice.

And I have to say, however they happen, I think miracles can be anything that upends our expectations about the world. And, in this case, it is that *the best comes last*.

I am so grateful for the notes and cards we have been receiving from you all. At the beginning of January, I got a letter from Kendall and Sonia. Kendall is one of our members who is a retired pastor, so he had some important advice for us. And he makes some interesting observations. He writes:

*If only ... there was a different word than "retirement" ... [The word] reveals how messed up our culture is about aging. The word ... means withdrawing, receding, going to bed. It's especially dreadful when one realizes its root meaning from the Old French, "to draw out, to endure," ultimately comes from the word "martyr," probably reflecting the fact that [martyrs] had to endure the torture of being stretched up to and beyond a point of dislocating their bones.*

Yikes.

But, Kendall writes, "this time of life for you [is] a grand adventure that will provide you with the opportunity to stretch and grow and discover new dimensions of what it means to be human."

“You know well,” he says, “how Robert Browning speaks of the possibilities inherent to this time of life that lies ahead:

*Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be.”*

Part of my work these days has been to go through my books and to let go of the ones that will not go with me into retirement. I have been trying to be ruthless about this.

In one pass, I came across a book titled “*The Best Is Yet To Be*.” I didn’t remember where I got it, but it was a book of devotions for retirement by Leroy Patterson, a former chaplain at Wheaton College. Not having much in common with the theology or social viewpoint of Wheaton College, I was about to toss it when I looked inside the front cover. And there in my mother’s handwriting – and this was after she had died – was a note: “Tim, this is written by the Pastor that dedicated you to the Lord on our way home from college. He also married Dick and I ... Very special in my life for many years. Mom.”

I was stunned. It was one of those miraculous moments when I wasn’t expecting to hear from my mother – especially about retirement – but there she was reminding me of my past and assuring me that the “best is yet to be.”

I kept the book.

Beloved ones, none of us know what to expect. I’m very aware that for some people, retirement is a long way from “the best.” I have heard of people who finally retire ... and drop dead. That is not my plan. There are those for whom retirement is an economic impossibility. That was true for me. So, I am so thankful to you and to our American Baptist retirement program for making this day possible.

It’s true. We do not know what to expect. But sometimes the miracle of the unexpected shows up and helps us imagine that there is a best that is yet to be.

And when that happens. It is probably because of love.

My mom and I disagreed about a lot of things. It was hard for her to accept who I truly am. Early on, I struggled sometimes to believe that she loved me.

But I could never have imagined the kind of life we had together in the end. Even through the haze of Alzheimer’s, difficult though it was, there were

those tender moments of hearing her sing those old hymns and remembering all the words. Hearing her sing old show tunes with Patrick. Hearing her say, “I love you, honey.” That was the best.

And all of you helped to make that happen. You welcomed her and loved her and included her. Whatever else had gone on, in the end, love won.

In that famous chapter – I Corinthians 13 – Paul follows up his instructions about communion by saying, “these three *remain*, faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.”

It’s a wedding in John 2. In that time not every marriage was about love. But that’s clearly what John has in mind. He’s the one who says: “For God so loved the world.” In his long farewell, Jesus says: “As my Abba has loved me, so I have loved you ... This is my commandment, that you love one another.”

John skips over most of the Last Supper but he gives us breakfast on the beach at the break of dawn. Jesus is dead and Peter has gone back to fishing. That was the best he could imagine. What else was there? What *more* could there be?

And the resurrected Jesus shows up on the beach as a cook to make breakfast for him and his friends. And Jesus says: “Peter, do you love me? If you love me, feed my sheep.” Tend my little ones. Heal the broken. Show up. Imagine that the *best* is yet to be.

Beloved ones, it means a lot to me that you made a point to show up today both here and online.

But it would mean even more in the days ahead if you would make a point to show up for each other; show up for those in need; show up for the lonely; show up for the broken; show up for world.

Never underestimate the power of showing up because there is a power already at work within you that can accomplish *far more* than anyone can ask or imagine.

The question at most weddings is simple. “Do you love this person?” And so it makes sense that John begins his story with a wedding and ends with a question: “Do you love me? If you do, feed my sheep. Show up for one another and the world.”

The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible says:  
*Set me as a seal upon your heart*

*For love is strong as death  
Waters cannot quench it  
Floods cannot drown it  
For love is stronger than death.*

This is not the end, beloved ones. Because love is strong. Because you showed up. And because there is a power already at work within you that can accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine.

But that question comes to us again today: Do you love me?

And today, if you hear that voice, for God's sake, for the world's sake for your sake, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The prayer honoring Archbishop Oscar Romero was written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan in 1979. Romero was increasingly involved in work on behalf of the poor in El Salvador which drew him into conflict with political leaders and right-wing forces. He was assassinated while saying Mass on March 24, 1980. "Set Me As A Seal Upon Your Heart," is from Song of Songs 8.6, music by Renee Clausen.