

## THE TASTE OF VINTAGE WINE

By Dennis Hale for UUFMSA, Mexico, August 28, 2011

According to the Gospel of John<sup>1</sup>, Jesus began his ministry at a party with a *wet bar*. How many of you remember the story? A bride and groom celebrate their wedding at the town of Cana in the province of Galilee. The whole community gathered for the event, perhaps the grand social celebration of the season. But a serious problem threatened to disrupt the week-long festivities to which Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples probably arrived toward the end of the week. John says that it was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who first noticed an embarrassing situation and stated it outright to Jesus. She said. "Son, the wine is running out."

No one knows how Mary knew. She may have been related to the bride or groom and thus privy to the goings on behind the scene. Perhaps she helped the family with the grand celebration. Maybe she was sensitive to a break in the normal chatter and buzz, or she noticed some irritation among the guests. Somehow she knew.

A lack of wine was not a trivial oversight. Wine was not only crucial to a wedding banquet; it was an essential element in the daily lives of people in that culture. Wine was a food, often drunk more frequently than water which had to be purified. Wine was a medicine. In a familiar parable, the Good Samaritan stumbled upon the man who had been beaten and robbed, and poured oil and wine into his wounds.

And remember the advice of the Apostle Paul who wrote to a young minister by the name of Timothy: "...don't worry too much about what the critics will say. Go ahead and drink a little wine... it's good for your digestion, good medicine for what ails you."<sup>2</sup> After an experience in Spain years ago, I began to take Paul's advice seriously.

I had eaten *empanada de bacalao*, a thick-crustured salt-cured-codfish pie, at a late-night dinner in a Spanish friend's home. I awoke the following morning with severe chest pains at the tender age of about 40. Judith, fearing the worse, rushed me to an emergency clinic. The doctor saw me immediately and first listened to my heart. He then plugged me into the EKG machine. After looking at the readout, without a word he left and returned with a small cup of thick white liquid and said. "Drink this." I did and five minutes later my "heart attack" was over.

Then Doctor Quintana asked. "What did you have for dinner last night?"

"*Empanada de bacalao*," I replied.

"And what else?"

"Well, I washed it down with a glass of milk."

"¿*Qué dice?* What did you say?" he asked. "You washed down *empanada* with milk? *Empanada* requires a glass of *Rivero* country wine to digest it. Don't ever again wash down *empanada* with milk." I never did, and that was my last "heart attack". In later years when a fellow missionary would criticize me for accepting wine at a meal with Spanish people, I could shrug and say, "Doctor's orders."

Wine was used in Jesus' day much as it is used in many countries today to aid digestion, to help produce a happy hour, to keep the joy of living high, to reinforce community. A *little* wine enhances the flow of conversation before *too much* wine destroys it. A *little* wine contributes to a healthy heart before *too much* wine destroys the liver.

Perhaps Mary saw the person responsible for the refreshments scrambling around trying to figure out what to do. Maybe she noticed someone watering down the last of the remaining wine. But according to John, the story teller, she definitely knew that a crisis threatened and she had the courage to declare it.

Many of us, when the elements necessary for a good life diminish, keep on acting like everything is fine. We keep a cheery face and a broad smile, like Hyacinth in the old BBC sitcom, "Keeping Up Appearances." But Mary told the truth. She had the strength and the guts to say it out loud: "The wine is running out!"

In our society today are we challenged by Mary's courage to tell the truth? As we mill about in what was once this grand wedding reception **of democracy, equality, and truth**, how does our wine glass look? Is it about empty? As I look at the state of the nation to the north, the origin of the most of us, it is increasingly clear to me that the wine is running out.

1. A few days ago, when the new presidential candidate from Texas was asked about the impact of that state's low-tax, low-service policies for the poor, the governor, who pretends to be America's super-Christian candidate, suggested that people who wanted more government services could find them in New York or California. Does that include the 150,000 poor children in Texas who lost their health care in 2003 and possibly 100,000 teachers who may lose their jobs? The wine is running out.

2. When the rich get more in tax breaks than the poor get from welfare, the wine is running out.<sup>3</sup>

3. When religious leaders, failing to persuade their church members to obey the religious precepts they are being taught, turn to political nincompoops to legislate those precepts into the law of the land so that their members and everybody else will be legally required to obey them, the wine is running out.

4. And as Farley said last Sunday, "When law and morality become legislated by theological nincompoops,"<sup>4</sup> the wine is running out.

5. When the annual U.S. military budget, including wars in foreign lands, veterans' benefits, nuclear and intelligence spending exceeds \$1 trillion a year, threatening programs that provide critical nutritional help for low-income mothers and their kids -- and malaria bed nets and vaccinations for children in Africa, the wine is running out.

6. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned us over 40 years ago, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." The wine is running out.

7. When the average effective tax rate for the wealthiest is now only 17 percent of their income and many corporations pay no taxes at all, the wine is running out.

8. When the U.S. locks up over two million of its citizens in cages and keeps another three million on parole under its watchful eye, a total of one in every fifty citizens, and the U.S. has the resources, but not the will to deal with the underlying causes of crime, the wine is running out.

9. When a state anti-immigration law like Alabama's takes effect on Sept. 1, it will make it illegal to rent a place to live to an undocumented alien, make it a crime to be a Good Samaritan providing transportation to the doctor, to the market, or to church. The wine is running out.

10. When the U.S. provides 90% of the weapons flowing south to enable the cartels in Mexico to kill innocent people to keep the supply of drugs flowing to the markets in the U.S., the wine is running out.

Let's get back to the Bible story. I get excited when I read that Mary goes over to talk with the one she thinks can solve the problem at the wedding party and says, "Son, the wine is running out."

Then the story takes an interesting turn. After a cryptic exchange between Jesus and his mother, John the story teller, says that “Six stone water jars were standing there normally used in the Jewish rite of purification and each could hold twenty or thirty gallons.”

Jesus walks over to those in charge and says, “Hey fellows, how about filling those empty jars over there with water.”

“So they fill them up to the brim.”

Then he tells them. “Now dip some out and take it to the caterer.”

When the caterer had taken a sip, he called the groom to one side and said, “Everyone serves the best French wine first and only later, when people are half drunk, the cheap stuff. But you’ve held back the good wine till now. Wow! This has the taste of vintage wine.”

Now I wish to pose a question. If a miracle occurred that day, what was the miracle? Was it a chemical transformation of water molecules that produced a rapid coloration and mutation into an alcoholic beverage with fruit flavors as well? Did ordinary water magically become vintage wine? Or, did those who drank the liquid *perceive* a delicious and flavorful wine in what had been only water?

Let’s ask Jesus: “Sir, what was this miracle you performed?” And Jesus might ask us in turn: “What miracle do you need?”

I have a theological problem when the story of Jesus’ changing water into wine becomes a story about Jesus rather than a story about the people he cared for. In fact, it may not be a miracle involving water and wine. It may be a miracle in us. Through whatever miracle that may have occurred in our lives, by whatever means, be it through our parents, a teacher or a professor or a friend, or through a spiritual leader, or through no one in particular. Did the miracle transform the way we *see* one another and the world?

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus begins his ministry not by saving people from their sins, but from social embarrassment. That may sound like poor theology, but when we grasp the meaning we realize that what appears as merely social embarrassment is in fact our deepest shortcoming: the social and ideological divisions that tear us apart. That’s embarrassing!

Any religion, whether of the right or the left, that does not deal with the fragmentation in the body politic is muddy water, not vintage wine—it’s bad religion. Any religion that doesn’t address the social divisions between the haves and the have-nots, between Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, gays and straights, men and women, Christians and Muslims, is bad religion.

Paraphrasing Episcopal minister Daniel Webster of Utah: Bad religion can make you hard, cold, mean and insensitive. Bad religion is worse than no religion. There’s not an evil cause in the world that has not been sponsored by somebody’s perverted religion. Bad religion spawned the crusades . . . set up the inquisition . . . bad religion took apartheid to South Africa . . . brought slavery to America, fostered segregation, bigotry and exploitation; bad religion supported the Ku Klux Klan; undergirded the Nazi party; created the Christian Coalition; produced Jim Jones, Jimmy Bakker, Jerry Falwell and David Koresh . . . bad religion assassinated Mahatma Gandhi; murdered Martin Luther King, Jr., and bombed the World Trade Towers.

Bad religion takes life. Good religion gives life. Bad religion pins one in. Good religion liberates. Bad religion talks about national defense, but good religion talks about national purpose . . . bad religion divides, good religion unites; bad religion makes you hate people, good religion makes you love everybody; bad religion segregates, good religion integrates; bad

religion stays in the church, good religion breaks loose in the San Miguel de Allende; bad religion accentuates the *love* of power, good religion lifts up the *power* of love.<sup>5</sup>

When I drink the vintage wine of good religion, I would hope that I no longer see on these cobblestone streets, a brown, black or a white person, a Mexican or an ex-pat, but a brother or a sister, a member of my human family. I have always loved the lyrics of ABBA's "I have a dream. "I believe in angels, something good in everything I see." Is that why this fellowship is collectively involved in making dreams come true in San Miguel de Allende? You lovingly give personal and financial support to...

**Jovenes Adelante:** co-founded by Virginia Wheelwright and Helen Morris, which now has 93 students in 28 universities in Mexico and 29 graduates serving in various professions.<sup>6</sup> According to Farley, not a single participant in this program has had to ford the Rio Grande in search of a job. That's the taste of vintage wine.

**CASA;** begun in 1981 as a mid-wife school, now a nonprofit serving the poor, particularly adolescents, rural women and their families, through health, social service, education, and environmental outreach. Its child development center serves 150 children.<sup>7</sup> That's the taste of vintage wine.

**Mujeres en Cambio,** founded in 1995 by expats and Mexicans, and led by Marge Zap for several years, to help impoverished women in the rural communities surrounding San Miguel de Allende. It currently helps support 45 young women in college and university and 105 in high school.<sup>8</sup> That's the taste of vintage wine.

**CEDESA (Center for Rural Development):** founded in 1965 by Father Guillermo Dávalos Martínez. CEDESA workers have taught the surrounding rural communities beekeeping and organic agriculture, as well as how to build and use dry toilets, recycle gray water, catch rainwater, build cisterns, and compost bins, how to start coops, and much more.<sup>9</sup> That's the taste of vintage wine.

**OJALA NIÑOS;** founded in 2008, by Elsmarie Norby, to improve the life of indigenous Mexican children in San Miguel Viejo nearby, offering afternoon classes in art, reading, writing, and music, free of charge to 120 local children taught by volunteers from the U.S., Canada, Costa Rica and the local Mexican community.<sup>10</sup> That's the taste of vintage wine.

And many of you individually support the Center for Global Justice, Casa Linda, Hospice, Feed the Hungry, House and Garden Tour for the *Biblioteca* scholarships, and many more reaching out. That's the taste of vintage wine.

Six stone water jars full of wine is between one hundred twenty and one hundred eighty gallons. That's a lot of wine. It's the story's way of saying that when we tap into the reservoir of love, concern, compassion, it will give us the courage to speak and resources to act. It will transform our racism into brotherhood, our sexism into a new wedding of redemptive relationships, and our economic exploitation into sharing the resources of our planet with all who inhabit it plant and animal alike. That's the taste of vintage wine.

I'll close with a recent story of a dream and a miracle.

Prior to her 9<sup>th</sup> birthday on June 12th of this year [2011], Rachel Beckwith of Seattle, Washington, aided by her mother, set up a page on a charity website. On the site Rachael wrote:

"I'm turning 9. I found out [at church] that millions of people don't live to see their 5th birthday. And why? Because they didn't have access to clean, safe water, so I'm celebrating my birthday like never before. I'm asking from everyone I know to donate to my campaign instead of gifts for my birthday. Every penny of the money raised will go

directly to fund freshwater projects in developing nations.... My goal is to raise \$300 by my birthday.... Please consider helping me. Thank you so much!!!”

By her June 12th birthday, she had raised \$220 and her mother closed the web-page. Rachel’s unselfish act would provide clean drinking water for 11 children. But on July 20th, Rachel was fatally injured in a 13-car pileup on I-90. A few days later she was taken off life support and a pastor from her church arranged for the donation page to be reopened with a footnote.

Money began to pour in from all over the world to Rachael’s charity, CharityWater.org, many gifts in the amount of \$9. As of yesterday, [August 27, 2011], Rachael’s 9<sup>th</sup> birthday wish has raised **\$1,216,083**.<sup>11</sup> Her dream will provide clean drinking water, not for 11, but for over 60,800 people. That’s a miracle of biblical proportions yet within the human capacity to make it happen.

So drink deeply, of the wine of living, loving, and being, and accept others as they are in order to empower them to be all they can be in today’s troubled world. Dream small, dream big, just dream and step out in San Miguel and experience the *taste* of vintage wine. That’s the miracle—the wonderful *taste* of unselfish love.

2764 words

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:1-10

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:23

<sup>3</sup> Sherwood Ross in *The Global Realm*, August 9, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Farley Wheelwright, *Godless Morality*, Sermon read SMA 21 Aug 2011

<sup>5</sup> Daniel J. Webster, *Bad Religion*, St. John's Episcopal Church, Logan, Utah, on September 30, 2001

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jovenesadelante.org/Our%20Students/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://casa.org.mx>

<sup>8</sup> [www.mujiresencambio.org](http://www.mujiresencambio.org)

<sup>9</sup> <http://cedesa.org.mx>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ojala-ninos.org/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://mycharitywater.org/p/campaign?campaign\\_id=16396](http://mycharitywater.org/p/campaign?campaign_id=16396)