

May 20 – Read John 2:1-11. John pointedly noted that Jesus changed water in jars used for ritual purification (verse 6) into “good wine” (verse 10). It was a sign that he offered a better way than his day’s rigid, repressive ritual system. Did you, in your growing up years or later, ever experience faith as rigid and repressive, draining life of joy and satisfaction? When has Jesus changed “water into wine” in your spiritual walk? John called this event “the first miraculous sign that Jesus did.” Jesus did not do things like changing the water into the “good wine” as an end in themselves. They were signs that pointed to God’s kingdom. John, wrote N. T. Wright, “is setting up a series of signposts to take us through his story. The signs are all occasions . . . when the transforming power of God’s love bursts in to the present world.” What qualities of God’s kingdom do you see this sign pointing toward?

May 21. Read Psalm 67:1-7. At the start, this psalm sounded like a “generic” expression of thanks to God. Not until verse 6 was the reason for gratitude specified: the vines and fields have produced a harvest. Scholar John Goldingay noted, “A traditional society cannot assume that this year’s harvest implies fruitfulness next year. There are no such guarantees. . . . this year’s blessing makes people pray more earnestly for next year’s blessing. It will be an expression of God’s grace, and it will issue from God’s face beaming out to them.” * Tragedies like the terrible fires that have destroyed so much in Paradise, CA and Hurricane Michael remind us that we, too, have no guarantee that our comforts and abundance will always continue uninterrupted. What ways have you learned to remind yourself to thank God for the good things in your life, rather than taking them for granted? The psalm’s thanksgiving was not just for a good harvest for Israel. “The prayer that this blessing of Israel will lead the ends of the earth to revere God links with the blessing given to Abraham, that all the world will pray to be blessed as Abraham is blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). The idea is that the world will see God’s ‘way,’ the pattern of God’s acting in relation to Israel.” Have you learned to ask God in your thanks and prayers to bless not only your family, community and country, but “all the nations,” “the far ends of the earth”?

May 22. Read Ephesians 5:15-21. In the ancient world, as today, some people tried to numb themselves against life’s pains by drinking too much wine (as well, of course, as other substance-based and behavioral escape mechanisms). To Christians in the city of Ephesus, Paul wrote that psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and always giving thanks to God were a better way. Jesus told the Samaritan woman he met at Jacob’s Well that the living water he would give her would be “a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life” (John 4:14). That same sense of bubbling, overflowing gratitude and life filled today’s reading. When have you most clearly sensed the joy, meaning and acceptance that God gives bubbling within you? In what ways have you been best able to express your thanks for God’s gift? The Message paraphrased Paul’s counsel in verses 18-19 with these words: “Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs!” Can gratitude to God be “intoxicating,” even habit-forming? Have you ever been in that condition, and if so, what was the experience like? What are some of the life benefits of having a “gratitude habit”?

May 23. Read Isaiah 25:6-9; 65:17-18, 21-25. As Israel's story began, God promised Abraham, "All the families of the earth will be blessed because of you" (Genesis 12:3). The prophet Isaiah said when God was victorious, he would prepare "a rich feast"—that was how rulers marked victories. The great food and drink was just a symbolic appetizer. God promised to "swallow up death forever," and "wipe tears from every face." And God's banquet would be for "all peoples," "all nations," "the whole earth." By Jesus' day, Israel's religious leaders loved the image of God's great banquet. Many were sure they alone would be the honored guests. They'd missed a crucial part of the vision. "In one of many expansive visions in Isaiah, God is imagined preparing a banquet not just for the elders on Mount Sinai (cf. Exodus 24), nor even for Judah, but for all the nations." What tempts you to limit your vision of God's "banquet" to just your own church, nation or ethnic group? How does your heart respond to God's expansive vision? Can you imagine the peace and joy of dwelling with God in a setting where "they won't hurt or destroy at any place"?

May 24. Read Luke 5:33-39. Wine makers today have different, more durable containers. In Bible times, "people employed animal skins, most often goatskins, as containers for fluids. Wine expands as it ferments; fermenting wine had already expanded old wineskins to their limit, so still-expanding new wine would rupture them." Jesus used the image to tell religious leaders who complained about him spending time with people they saw as "sinners" that his kingdom could not be contained or restrained by their rules and habits. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote that Jesus "explains what he's doing, to the grumblers, with what we today would call a Mission Statement....his job is to call sinners to repentance. No longer are people to be placed in two categories....this new age is the time of forgiveness....This is the new covenant spoken of by the prophets; forgiveness is here....Never mind if it upsets the tidy classifications of the old system." Do too many religious people still place people in two tidy categories? How can you avoid doing that? Scholar William Barclay noted a related idea. "'Don't,' says Jesus, 'let your mind become like an old wineskin. People say of wine, 'The old is better.' It may be at the moment, but they forget that it is a mistake to despise the new wine, for the day will come when it has matured and it will be best of all.' The passage is Jesus' condemnation of the shut mind and a plea that men should not reject new ideas." What helps you stay open to new ideas—not to blindly accept them, but not to reject them just because they're new either?