

# Story and Meditation: Fill the Jars

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1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

*by Eric Anderson*

How did the laulele come to grow where it did? It didn't really know. Sometimes the memories of the seed aren't retained by the plant, I guess. As the bright sun yellow of its blossom closed, its new seeds took form within its green-shrouded crown, bobbling a little in the breeze. The jagged edged leaves didn't emerge from the narrow stem, but formed a somewhat messy carpet below, gathering energy from the sun and sending it up the shoot to shape the seeds and push something milky and cottony out beyond the green enclosure.

If you're wondering what other names a laulele might have, and if you're thinking it sounds a little bit like a dandelion, well, it's so much like a dandelion to be the same flower with a different name.

The seeds inside their green shroud were quite excited. They weren't noisy at all – seeds are rarely talkative – but you could almost feel their eagerness vibrating down the stem. Finally came the day when all was prepared. The seeds were shaped, their cottony crowns were full, and the world lay before them. The flower opened again to form this ball of ethereal whiteness, delicate white feathery tendrils gently fluttering as they made circles on tiny stalks above the seeds. And then...

Nothing happened.

"What happens next?" asked one seed. Nobody knew. Nobody on that dandelion had ever done this before. The plant itself didn't remember.

"What are we supposed to do?" asked another.

"Are we supposed to do anything?" wondered a third. Again, nobody knew.

The day was bright and rather hot. The air was still. The seeds got just a little bit drowsy. As the sun set, the flower closed again. The seeds could hear raindrops falling outside the green shelter.

The next day was much the same. Hot, dry, still, and the next night it didn't even rain.

The third day one of the seeds decided that something ought to happen, but even though several of the others agreed they still didn't know what ought to happen. They didn't have any way to push themselves off the central ball of the flower. They didn't even know if that was a good idea. And then... along came the breeze.

First it rustled the leaves of the taller trees nearby. Then the tops of the grasses began to wave. When it reached the laulele, those circles of whiteness above the seeds began to dance. The tendrils kind of shaped themselves around the moving breeze.

To each seed, it felt suddenly like there was an emptiness beneath their own cottony canopy. One by one to each seed, it felt suddenly like that emptiness was being filled by the breeze. One by one each seed let that emptiness be filled, and...

One by one they took flight and soared away.

I fear that I've lost the good will of the most avid gardeners with that story that makes laulele, dandelions, the hero. In New England where I lived most of my life dandelions are hated as a weedy invader, despite their bright color and the joy that blowing their seeds has given to generations of toddlers. That's a problem. The story of the wedding at Cana also has problems, starting with the nature of what John identifies as Jesus' first sign of power.

Typically, Jesus responded to deep, urgent needs. Elisabeth Johnson writes at *Working Preacher*, "It is perhaps a bit surprising, then, that the first miracle of Jesus' ministry in John's Gospel is one that seems almost frivolous. There is no desperate, life-threatening need in this story, no crisis of hunger or illness. Rather, the crisis in this story is that the wine has run out at a wedding banquet. It is a problem which threatens to cut a wedding celebration short and to cause considerable embarrassment to the hosts, but certainly poses no immediate danger to anyone's life or health."

Those who have struggled with an alcohol addiction – and after twenty-one months of a global pandemic that's likely to be more of us – aren't likely to appreciate Jesus' production of between 120 and 150 gallons of intoxicating liquid. In fact, the point when the guests have drunk everything in sight is probably a good moment to cut them off.

Jesus' behavior to his mother is downright rude. "Woman," he said. What son in the first century or the twenty-first century calls his mother "woman" and doesn't expect a well-earned rebuke for it? And if we hadn't caught the rudeness, John picked it up and carried it along. John was the only Gospel writer who didn't use Mary's name. Rude.

It's also the only sign in John's Gospel that received no elaboration. Generally in John, when Jesus performed a sign, like feeding the five thousand, there was a conversation afterwards. Those discussions end with some kind of "I am" statement. "I am the bread of life."

After the wedding at Cana, all John gave us was, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

If you’d like to join me in a heartfelt, “Huh?” go right ahead.

There’s another curious thing about this sign, quite aside from not being clear what it’s a sign of. It’s the filling of those jars. Six stone jars, twenty to thirty gallons each. Fill them up, Jesus said. A little math later, that’s between sixty and ninety buckets full of water. How many servants? How many buckets? John didn’t say. I can only hope for the servants’ sake that there was already some water in those jars, because that’s a lot of work and a fair amount of time.

But Jesus had them fill up the jars to the brim.

Only then did the sign happen, or the miracle, or the intervention of God’s power. Only then did Jesus make things different.

After the jars were filled.

I don’t know about you, but personally I’m feeling like the water in the jar is a fair way down from the brim. I’d like to think I’m a twenty-gallon jar, or even a thirty-gallon jar – that’s gallons of spirit and wisdom and energy, not just gallons of flesh – but the funny thing about jars is that they get emptied. Along comes the servant to dip off a pitcher. Along comes the question that needs to be answered. Along comes the circumstance that needs water for washing. Along comes the problem that needs to be addressed. Along comes the wedding that runs out of the celebration liquid. Along comes the crisis... like twenty months of a global pandemic.

We all have a lot of reason to feel like our jars are low on water, like the ripping reflection is awfully close to the bottom when we peer down inside.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg tweeted on Friday, “We need to rest up. There’s work to be done. But we can’t do it if we’re running on empty. Recharging is important. Shabbat Shalom. Amen.”

This week or next we’d hoped to resume worship with a congregation present – but that was a plan that didn’t anticipate the terrible spike in COVID diagnoses we’ve seen since mid-December. According to the state Department of Health, we’ve had 1250 new cases diagnosed in Hilo in the last two weeks. That’s one in thirty-six residents of Hilo.

Oh, my, yes, the water in those jars is getting low.

I’ve been advising you to sustain yourselves in body and spirit for months now. And here I go again. How do you fill those jars?

Give yourself space and time to do it. It’s important. Other things might be pressing, but other things may not be possible until you’ve given yourself space and time to recharge.

Use the basics to refill yourself. Jesus called for water and transformed it. He didn't call for wine and multiply it. Give your body simple exercise and nutritious food that doesn't take a lot out of you to prepare. Give your mind enough of a challenge to be engaging but not so much that it's frustrating. Give your spirit the reassurance of a Psalm or the comfort of one of the Church's simplest prayers: "O Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

Fill the jars from time to time. They're big jars; they hold a lot. That's really useful when you're pouring out. In times that demand a lot, that also means restoring yourself takes time and resources. Every once in a while, fill them up.

You don't need to do this alone. Jesus had the servants fetch the water. For that matter, his mother got everything moving in the first place. Somebody like Mary has good advice for you. Take it. Somebody else can help move what you need. Accept it.

And then, try not to be surprised when the sign happens, when the simple nourishments you've sought for your body, mind, and spirit transform within you and become something wondrous to others. It happens, and it happens more often than we realize. As Karoline Lewis writes at *Working Preacher*, "Jesus' signs show you, don't tell you, what abundant grace is, 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace' (1:16). Turning water into wine is revealing of abundant grace in this season of Epiphany. And what does abundant grace taste like? Like the best wine when you are expecting the cheap stuff. It's one thing to say, 'Jesus is the source of grace.' It's quite another to have an experience of it."

With the jars of your spirit filled, God will have something to transform, and you will have that experience of grace. So will those around you.

Fill the jars.

Amen.