

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

In the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12

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Jesus turns water into wine; the Spirit turns ordinary people into apostles and prophets, preachers, and wisdom speakers, and...

David Wilcox sings a song, a story-telling song, about a young woman, afraid of her shadow, beholden to her boyfriend Johnny, who is beholden to his Camaro. Quite out of character, she signs up to go on an outward-bound trip to Africa. There she gets sunburned through her hat, begins to tone some never-before-used muscles, and discovers she's capable of more than she ever thought possible. One day, separated from the group, she's chased by a hyena. Running, afraid, she jumps to catch the lowest branch of a tall tree.

When the hyena danger had passed, she drops to lower herself down to then discover her feet are 4 feet off the ground. "She didn't know she could jump that high. Ah but she does now." And when she returns home, it's so long, Johnny and your Camaro.

Sometimes you don't know you can do something until you do it. And then discover a power within you moving with grace and force that you didn't know was there and wouldn't have known were it not for the unknown that you stepped into by faith or by necessity.

Faith and necessity met at Cana. I don't know if Jesus knew for sure he could turn water into wine, but he hadn't done it before. I don't know if Jesus knew he could solve a social crisis that beset the wedding hosts, but he hadn't done that before either. He didn't seem to want to get involved. But his mother did. Listen to your mother. Jesus' mother wasn't daunted about the scale of the problem, nor intimidated by the unlikely means to solve it, nor that Jesus said, "My time has not yet come." Yes, it has, son. Your time has come.

Jesus then did somehow what grapevines quietly do all year. Jesus, the Lord of sun and soil and grapes and grapevines, also did it, in the flash of a crisis, in the blink of trouble. It was his first sign that his time had come. Did he know he could do all of that before that day?

What have you done you didn't think was possible? Perhaps not water into wine.

But... you've done some things. You've faced some crises. You've stepped out beyond what you knew you could do into the unknown.

You didn't think you could find the money to get through all 4 years of college, but somehow you scraped through, and you made it.

You didn't think

- . . .you could go from your couch to a 5k, but you did it and crossed the finish line...
- . . . you could possibly repair the marriage in the shape things were in...
- . . .You could go on living another day with the heartbreak of your loss...
- . . .you could beat the addiction... survive the cancer or its chemo...
- . . .withstand the criticism... weather the temptations...
- . . .find a new life and new hope in a new place...
- . . .forgive the person who hurt you the way they did...

But you did.

Every example there is from someone in this room. And there are so, so many more. These walls are soaked with the tears of impossible and the prayers of "Lord, help me," and the quiet gratitude of "I believe, help still my unbelief."

I've been amazed many more times than I can count at what people have endured or accomplished by faith and by necessity. Water into wine? That's amazing. There are times in our lives looking back when it's more like battery acid into wine.

How did you do that? You had some courage, that's for sure; you tried hard, yes, you suffered, no doubt. You paid the price, as the coaches say. Yes, yet, still something else, some nudge, some pushing and pulling that took you to places you didn't know you could go. Something deep inside that said, Yes, this. Something beyond you was part of it. Courage, for sure. Necessity, sometimes. Inner strength, your enneagram number, perhaps?

How about the Holy Spirit? How about the Spirit of God, working in trouble and trial and suffering and the unknown? Why not?

Back in high school, I sang in our church's chapel choir, which was our lofty name for our youth choir, which was a thing that churches did then. (And wouldn't be bad to do again today, I'm just saying.) On certain songs, various students had a solo for a line or two, and eventually, by the time I was a senior, the time came for me to have a 2-line solo in a song. We'd all sing the beginning, and then I'd sing two lines solo, and then we'd go back to the 4-part harmony for the rest of it. I worked and worked on those two lines. And got pretty good, good enough anyway.

Then we went on tour, a bus tour from Texas to California with stops along the way. One of our first stops was a church in Albuquerque where we gave a concert on a Sunday evening. Everything was going fine. Choir sounded good; congregation was receptive. Then it came time for my song. The piano started. The song began, and then I realized I have no idea what my words are. I couldn't call them up. They'd vanished, they were nowhere I could access. We'd been trained to stand very still, but I started gesturing with my hand to our director some made up Elvish sign language for "Aaaaaah. I'm in trouble here." He didn't see or chose not to see. The song kept on plowing along, despite my willing it to stop or a

meteor or something. And then it was time. He hadn't seen I was in trouble. But I don't know how else to account for this: *The Spirit* saw. The director turned to me, up in the third row, and pointed. With nothing else left to do, I inhaled, opened my mouth and--I'm not making this up--in that moment, I had no idea what was going to come out. None. But the time had come. I started singing, and would you believe--I could hardly believe--every word came out, and in correct order one by one, each a mystery until they were heard. I don't think I knew the next word until it came out. Each word like manna sufficient for the moment. Then my part was over, thanks be to God, and I probably just fainted right then. Just passed out.

I still don't know how that happened. Mental Muscle memory, weeks of training, which had lodged the words into my subconscious or the synapses of my brain fired at just the right moment. Sure. I'm in for all of that explanation of performance in anxiety. I'm in for neuropsychology and brain chemistry and serotonin. But--and I've thought about that experience many times through the lens of similar experiences I and others have had--It was more. The Spirit. It's not the most dramatic story or of the most awful time in the lives we know and we live, but it mattered to me. And it shaped me.

I'm not alone. We're not alone.

The Spirit of God, this mystery of God's power and presence, is active and alive and here. In the Spirit, we can do more than we ever thought we could do on our own strength. I've experienced that again and again since then. And I've seen it in the faithfulness of fellow Christians who have amazed me with their courage and strength in time of trouble.

St. Paul encourages the Corinthians, "You are gifted in a variety of different ways, each for the common good." This is all from the same Spirit. Sometimes we need help in crisis, sometimes we need a nudge or a push forward beyond our comfort. You have capacity you might not know you have until it's called out of you by God or by the challenge you face.

It's hard not to get swept up into this mystery once you experience it. In Ephesians, Paul gets caught up into a prayer right in the middle of a letter, just thinking about it: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen!" (Eph 3.20) And then he realized he was only half-way done writing and he had to keep going---he just got swept up into this prayer of praise from the experience of being relieved and saved and restored and delivered from a moment of crisis.

What activates this power within us? In Ephesians, the Apostle speaks of God's riches of glory granted to us who are strengthened with power through the Spirit in our inner being. So that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, rooting and grounding us in love, and giving us strength to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and fills us with the faithfulness of God.

That's the kind of passage that can change a person. It's amazing what you can do when you don't mind who gets the credit, when you're open even a little to the prompting of the Spirit (Lord, help me), when you're willing to serve the common good and Christ which is the purpose of all the Spirit does in us and has done in God's people through all generations.

Dr. King, you didn't know you could change a nation, until you did. George Handel, did you know you could write *The Messiah* until the Alleluias poured from your pen, over and over? Did Amy Carmichael know she could change the lives of a generation of vulnerable girls in India and preach the gospel to thousands, until she did it? Did C.S. Lewis know he could bring Narnia to life?

You'll say, "I didn't think I could do it, until I did." And then, you'll say, "But it wasn't me." The Spirit nudged you. Pushed you. Empowered you. You'll remember a power in you, you didn't know you had--A sense of possibility you didn't know possible--A conviction that makes little sense but you know you must follow. This and nothing other.

That kind of experience in life will change you, and it becomes one of the many ways that your life says, in the power only the Holy Spirit makes possible, "Jesus is Lord."

For those experiences in life that challenge and change us, for the faithfulness of God, the salvation of Christ's cross, for the ministry of the Spirit, we give thanks. For all the ways we experience life with God and for all the ways we're experiencing life with God now, and for all we need, and all we are becoming, we trust the Lord. We pray to the Lord to take us as we are and make us all you would have us be. Our lives are yours. This is the prayer and the step of faith that God uses to transform our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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