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CHAPTER ONE

SENSING GOD IN WINE



*May God give you of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.*

GENESIS 27:28

I have always loved the world of wine as we experienced it on a small family-run winery. My childhood growing up on a winery did not make me into a vintner though. Two of my sisters embraced that blessed vocation. I chose a vocation with a similar feel to it. I wanted to be a theologian, working in God's vineyard, and it still surprises me to see how profoundly the world of faith and the world of wine are interwoven.

Wine is an astonishing gift to humanity, and I firmly believe that wine can help uncork a more full-bodied Christian spirituality in our midst and enrich our lives around the Table. At their best, choice wines can evoke a great sense of awe and wonder within us. They hint at a Presence among us that is so full of splendor, magnificence, and beauty that we creatures of dust and breath would be

*"I will restore the fortunes
of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the
ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards
and drink their wine,
and they shall make
gardens and eat their fruit.*

*I will plant them
upon their land,
and they shall never
again be plucked up."*

AMOS 9:14-15 (ABOUT
THE MESSIANIC AGE)

utterly overwhelmed if we encountered this Presence face to face. We earthlings only seem to get glimpses of it here and there.

Since ancient times people have believed that wine is imbued with spiritual meaning and can become a mediator between heaven and earth, evoking divine presence. The Greeks believed in the wine god Dionysus, the Romans in Bacchus, and the Etruscans in Fufluns. The Jews believe

God gave them wine to make glad their hearts, and Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and wine. Once upon a time all of these different faith traditions believed that a mysterious presence hovered over the powerful process of fermentation, urging it on with divine purpose.

One of the great gifts of my childhood is that I grew up with a family and culture that celebrated wine as a gift from God and allowed this divine beverage to transform our mundane moments into beautiful encounters, sometimes imbued with heavenly bliss.

JESUS AND WINE

Growing up on a winery, the great abundance of the earth mingled with my experiences at church, where I heard and listened to the marvelous stories of Jesus of Nazareth. I remember vividly the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus, a wealthy man who wanted to get a glimpse of the great prophet who had come into town. So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a tree to make sure he got to see Jesus when he walked by. Zacchaeus was a wretched man, but he was hungry and thirsty for more. Jesus saw him in the tree, called him by name, and invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's house—just like that. How did Jesus know his name?

I had no doubt, listening to this story as a little girl, that Zacchaeus would have provided a banquet for Jesus with only the best food and wine. Just like my dad, he would have gone down into the wine cellar himself to select a wide range of choice wines for this honorable guest, wines he would only pull out for special occasions. They would have talked late into the night and bonded over food and wine. At the end of the evening, Zacchaeus's life was transformed. Jesus' loving and accepting presence had touched him so deeply that this once-greedy man gave half of his wealth away, and he was unburdened and ready to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus performed miracles to pull away the veil that keeps our eyes and ears, our noses and tongues from sensing God's presence

among us. In Jesus' life, his words and deeds both great and small, in the way he encountered and touched people, through his suffering, death, and resurrection, we see into the very heart of God, our loving Father. His life-spending Spirit continues to revitalize and green even the most barren places of our lives and communities if we allow him to move among us. He is not forceful or overbearing but woos us into his presence like a lover does his beloved bride.

First things and last things are important in a person's life and ministry. They announce and mark and signal to us what a person

"I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

JESUS THE MESSIAH,
MATTHEW 26:29

values and wants us to remember and be grounded in. Writers give witness to what they have heard and seen about people who changed the course of history, and we need to pay careful attention to their words, especially as they tell us about those first and last things these people have done. This is no less true for the Gospels, which give witness to Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

In the Gospel of John we learn that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a Jewish peasant wedding where the host had run out of wine. His last miracle was supernaturally providing an abundance of fish for his ragamuffin fishermen followers, including Peter, who had betrayed him three times.

Fruit of the earth and fruit of the sea become places where God reveals his glorious and loving presence among us, feeding and

nurturing us in body, soul, and spirit. Jesus even cooks some fish by the beach *before* his disciples are able to haul that great catch onto the shore.

Our harvests, whether in wine or fish, in words and deeds, will only ever add a little to that great abundance that God has provided for us both in the fruits of the earth and the resurrected Christ, who is the first fruit of all of creation.

THE GIFT OF FIVE SENSES

Not too long ago I took part in the Bay Area Book Festival in Berkeley, California. My book *The Spirituality of Wine* had just come out, and the organizers had assigned me a booth located on “Inspiration Row,” sandwiched in between Hare Krishnas and Buddhists. It was a fascinating experience, and I was eager to get acquainted with my neighbors. The Hare Krishna couple had brought candies and offered them freely to those passing by. Once the candy was accepted, the Hare Krishna couple invited the visitors to learn more about their faith tradition. They had a book they would open to help them explain.

I was intrigued. I wanted to learn about them and during a quiet spell went over and introduced myself. The lady kindly opened her book and showed me an image of a cart pulled by five horses. She explained that the five horses represent the five senses: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. As the picture showed, we must learn to reign in the five senses because they always want to lead us astray, away from the true spiritual path. If someone offers you some ice cream, she explained, you want more and can't stop. *Yes, that sounded familiar!* I thought. She believed

that the senses are deceptive and lead us astray. We must not trust them but learn instead to control them. As you progress on the spiritual path, you have to learn how to reign in the senses and fight against their appetites. I had never thought of it before, but fundamentally, for the Hare Krishna, the five senses are bad, and we must do all we can to control them in order to ascend to a higher spiritual realm.

There, I had a little bit of a revelation. I suddenly realized that most religions practiced today believe that the five senses contribute little to true spiritual enlightenment, and in order to progress in the spiritual life we must detach ourselves from physical pleasure and withdraw to the spiritual within. It dawned on me then that the Jewish and Christian faiths are the only faith traditions as far as I am aware that believe the five senses are a gift from God, a gift to be embraced, treasured, and celebrated. And yet even within the Christian tradition there is still a profound suspicion toward the senses of touch, smell, and taste, and how they might aid us in our pursuit of sensing God's presence among us.

We need to rediscover and affirm our God-given senses as the only way through which we can come to know and sense God's presence with us. God gave wine to make glad the hearts of humanity. Wine has a unique way of helping us forge new alliances, strengthen bonds of friendships, and build community. It connects us to the earth, inspires us toward creativity, and invites us to linger in the present moment, both secular and sacred. Savoring a well-crafted glass of wine can move us to commune with God and embrace the joy that comes from receiving this gift with receptive hearts, noses, and tongues.

REDISCOVERING WINE

All the great theologians and church reformers wrote about and celebrated wine as a gift from God. Up until the nineteenth century all Christian traditions served wine in the Lord's Supper. And yet in today's Christian culture, there is little witness to this rich interweaving of wine, feasting, and redemptive living. Wine just isn't talked about. I believe this has created a void in our culture, and we

"The earth also shall yield its fruit ten-thousandfold and on each vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall produce a thousand clusters, and each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape produce a cor of wine. And those who have hungered shall rejoice: more over, also, they shall behold marvels every day."

2 BARUCH 29:5-6 (ABOUT THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM)

have given over to the secular world the task of determining the meaning of wine for us. I think that's quite tragic. Why?

Many can't see and don't experience those moments of grace when a lovely and delectable wine softens the hard places within and opens us up to those around us. That's particularly heart-wrenching because at no other time in history have we had such easy access to great and wonderful wines from around the world right at our local wine stores.

North Americans in particular are rediscovering wine, and it is quickly becoming a powerful cultural force in our midst. The aftermath of the Prohibition could only last so long, and on a broad scale

people are discovering that wine is a fantastic drink. Wineries are popping up all over the place. Wine shops and wine bars have added color and sophistication to downtown areas and residential neighborhoods, and even at airports fast-food chains give way to a more demanding and liberated clientele that has become increasingly dissatisfied with junk food. It's an exciting development, but I feel there is something missing, something important.

THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY WINE TALK

With the emergence of a new and young wine culture has come a way of talking about wine I find both intriguing and enlightening, but also unsettling and restrictive. Over the last fifty years or so a new guild of wine writers, wine educators, and sommeliers has emerged who take their work seriously. You can learn much from them. However, they have emerged out of a highly competitive consumer culture, and they perpetuate ways of talking about wine that quickly pull us into a competitive, elitist, and perhaps exclusive way of talking about wine. It can easily make us feel inadequate, ignorant, and overwhelmed. That's not fun, and that's not how it was meant to be. It goes against the grain of what love and grace are all about and what gifts are for.

When talk about wine becomes a barrier for you to be able to enter the world of wine and explore wine on your own terms and enjoy it, then something important has gotten lost. The door is shut for many who would otherwise be quite interested in exploring wine. Ultimately, no one can capture the beauty of a well-crafted wine in language. Words help for sure, but they can only hint at the beauty

and complexity we experience in a well-crafted wine. Wines at their best make us marvel and instill in us a sense of awe for what this earth is capable of bringing forth. They lift us out of the mundane to a place of wonder and give us a glimpse into the very heart of what it means to be alive in this world. There is mystery in wine.

I am concerned that many of you, perhaps new to the world of wine, feel so intimidated and overwhelmed by it all that you think it's not for you. You might walk into a supermarket or a wine shop, or look at the long wine list in a fancy restaurant with names that you will never be able to pronounce, and think it's best left to the experts and wine enthusiasts. *It's not for me.* But God gave wine to make glad the hearts of humanity, and to miss out on this great gift and the joy and conviviality it can bring is a great loss.

It is freeing when you can look back in history and learn how different cultures and writers have understood wine. It opens up a vision that liberates you to consider a wider world and embrace values that are perhaps more welcoming and inclusive. When Benedictine nuns first began planting vines along the river Main in our region of Germany, they had a particular way of understanding wine. They ingested the Bible and the Rule of St. Benedict daily, and this perspective shaped their vision and values. They saw wine as a gift from God and crafted it for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, for their own nourishment, and to share it with those around them. Both the Bible and the Rule of St. Benedict stress the importance of hospitality and taking care of the sick, poor, and vulnerable of society. To share the wine they crafted with guests, pilgrims, the sick, and the poor was fundamental to their vision of the Christian life.

Even fourteen hundred years later, Christians still uphold those beliefs and values, and yet when it comes to wine, we've allowed the secular world to define what wine is for. Wine and wine talk has become a way to differentiate yourself from others and help you to secure a sense of identity built on your education, knowledge, and financial success. It has tendencies to be competitive, exclusive, and elitist. I think it's time to reclaim wine as a gift from God and re-define its meaning on our own terms, away from the pressures of the highly competitive consumer societies that seem to haunt us wherever we go.

ENJOYING WINE AS A GIFT FROM GOD

While wine has long been an integral part of European culture, the ordinary wine drinker does not know much about wine. Traditionally, they only drank their local wines and didn't know much about those particular local wines either. It was part of their culture just like their local cheese and bread. And they enjoyed the wine without the pressure to become a sophisticated wine consumer. That's still the case with most wine drinkers where I come from in Franconia, where wine has been cultivated since the Romans came. It was and is just part of life and part of *joie de vivre*—the enjoyment of life. These innocent times are gone.

We have to learn to maneuver our way around this ever-changing and complex world of wine where the wine-marketing experts fiercely compete for our attention and want to submit us to their talk about wine.

I have written *The Soul of Wine* to help you rediscover wine as a spiritual and cultural gift. We must reclaim wine as a gift from God

and allow it to bring joy and conviviality into our midst. Wine was never meant just for a small and elite group of well-to-do people but is a gift from God to us all. We can and should learn together how wine can help us reconnect with God, one another, and creation. Wine can reenchant the world for us and help us fall in love with it all over again. There is a good reason why Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine. Few created things can hint at the glory of the heavenly wedding banquet like a choice wine can.

I would like to introduce you to the world of wine sip by sip, help you shed any sense of intimidation that you might have, and help you embrace this world with a sense of curiosity and wonder. I want you to come alongside me and let me be your guide. Let's have some fun while we explore this together and keep those at bay who seek to intimidate us by their sometimes outlandish and elitist wine talk. Let the convivial embrace begin.

This book is about rediscovering the gift of wine for what it was meant to be and do: reveal glimpses of God's incredible love, generosity, and benevolence toward us. We have let this gift fall by the wayside, and the secular world now defines the meaning of wine for us. It eclipses the superabundant generosity of God, who always desires to give us more than we need, even wine. We are more than survivors in this world; our lives were never meant to be just about water and bread but also about wine and wild-caught fish.

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