

Jesus: The Good Wine

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John 2: 1-11

I have always thought the story of the Wedding at Cana is one great story. It is mysterious, miraculous, humorous and really quite memorable and entertaining. Preachers love hearing stories about weddings, weddings involving other clergy, weddings that seem like an accident just waiting to happen. (It doesn't only happen to me!) But as much as I like this story, I also need to say that I have always found it to be a rather unusual way to begin a Gospel account of Jesus' ministry.

The Gospel of John contains only seven stories involving a miracle performed by Jesus, far fewer than any other Gospel. John calls them signs. Each miracle points beyond itself to some higher meaning. So why would John begin his story with this miracle, this sign. Turning water into wine...not bad, pretty cool. Think how many more weddings we would have around here if I could pull that one off. What a marketing tool that would be. Bring a bottle of water; leave with a bottle of cabernet! But as I think about Jesus' ministry, it seems to me that his miracles always have some higher purpose – healing someone who is afflicted with a terrible illness or disability, even raising the dead. But this? Miraculously producing a huge amount of wine so that the wedding party won't poop out? If there is some higher meaning or deeper revelation here, what is it? Again, it is great fun, but why tell this particular story?

There certainly is no lack of material here. In Jesus' day, the bride and groom celebrated their marriage, not with a honeymoon, but with a seven day wedding feast at the groom's home. So when Jesus arrives, the party has already been going on for a while, but now the celebration is in big trouble. The wine is running out before the party is over. This is a crisis for the groom's family, who has the responsibility of hospitality. In what was a shame/honor culture, they are on the verge of suffering a great shame – having to send their guests home early.

And Jesus' mother sees all this. Interesting, in John, Mary is never named. She is always the "mother of Jesus." "They have no wine," she tells Jesus. The implication is that he can and should do something about it. But he initially refuses, suggesting that the time isn't right. That is a big theme in John – Jesus' hour – Jesus' time that is to come. She suggests – he resists. We could perhaps spend time with the mother-adult son relationship. But, prompted by his mother – oh, Mom! – Jesus seemingly changes his mind, and takes dramatic action. Mary nudges Jesus into action. That would be a sermon theme by itself – nudging the divine.

So often in John it seems that one thing points to something else. I think of six empty ritual stone jars, standing there, doing nothing. Could this be symbolic of an old order, an old, empty, tradition-bound religion, that is about to be replaced with new wine, new life, new vitality, new meaning? Could there be a warning here for the established church?

And then there is the actual miracle itself, water changed into an overwhelming amount of good wine, all of which leads to one of the great biblical punch lines, delivered not by Jesus but the wine steward: "Everyone knows that you serve the good wine first and then the Two Buck Chuck when everyone is too drunk to care. But you, Mr. Bridegroom, have saved the best for last. Only now, you bring out the good wine." Is that a comment about wine, or about the one who performs the miracle...Jesus, the good wine, now revealed for all to see...Jesus, the source of all good things.

Yes, there is a lot here. But when I return to the question, why tell this story, why make this the first of Jesus' seven miracles in the Gospel of John, I keep coming back to that abundance of good wine, kept under wraps until now. Jesus comes on the scene, and where once there was shortage, scarcity and lack, there is now overflowing abundance. Says one scholar, "The moment that Jesus stepped on earth, according to John, things broke forth, broke out and overflowed. The jars are filled up to the brim. There is no cautious, careful restraint in this story. Jesus shows up at the party and there is this miraculous effervescence of glory."

A story told by author and teacher, Parker Palmer: "For ten years I lived in an intentional community that was often graced by residents from abroad. One of them was a highly placed official in the government of the People's Republic of China, a man whose inner light was as strong and steady as any I have ever known.

"One day this man offered to cook a Chinese dinner for eight of us and we quickly accepted. I drove him to the grocery store and though I already had twenty dollars in my wallet, I stopped at the bank on the way. I assumed we would need to purchase the cartload of groceries that is customary, say, for a middle-class, American Thanksgiving. Once inside the store, my Chinese friend purchased only enough vegetables, eggs, rice and a few other items to fill a small bag. My original twenty dollars was more than enough and we then headed home.

"He gathered us in the kitchen and showed us how to help prepare the meal. We found spices, brought out pots and pans, made sauces, separated eggs and chopped those vegetables so

fine I thought they would disappear. Instead, they multiplied and so did our joy. We spent the better part of the afternoon in that kitchen, talking and laughing and learning.

“The actual cooking took hardly any time. Six or eight dishes were prepared and set on the table before an astonished group. From that small bag of groceries had emerged a dinner large enough to satisfy all of us – a satisfaction that was laced with the joy that we took in our Chinese friend, the wonder of sharing in his rich and ancient culture, the delight of each other’s company, and the sense that we had somehow stepped closer to world peace. The alchemy of love had turned scarcity into abundance.”

Ah, the mysterious alchemy and abundance of love. Could this be why John chooses to lead off his Gospel with this particular story? Could it be a sign of the abundance of love and hope and new possibilities that have burst into our world with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth? I know that many of us may have a problem with this story. Water into wine?...come on, Gene. We are modern, sophisticated, scientific people. How can we be expected to wrap our brains around a primitive, first century miracle story? Or, as one colleague says, “We live in a flattened, modern world where all mystery is researched, defined, explained and thus narrowed.” But then along comes John, saying to us pragmatic, utilitarian people, “Hold on to your hats! Jesus is on the move. The light of the world is shining into our darkness! An effusive, extravagant, overflowing, glorious stream of love and joy and hope has been set loose into our constricted, sad and often very inglorious world.”

And perhaps there is another, even more significant reason why we struggle with a story such as this. We are so darned careful, cautious and restrained. We don’t make big moves in life. Unlike the mother of Jesus, we don’t ask big things of God. We keep our faith tucked away in the confines of our church. We keep our prayers safe, cautious and careful...like us. My goodness, suddenly it feels like I am preaching to me.

I am about to reveal my age. My mind goes back to an old Candid Camera episode. Remember that show which consisted of film crews roving about the country setting up unlikely situations and then filming people as they reacted to these situations without knowing they were being filmed? The episode I recall was a perfectly normal table in a perfectly normal lunchroom with a flower sitting in a vase on the table. Somebody would sit down and start drinking his coffee or milk or whatever, and when he would set the drink down for a few moments between sips, the flower would rear up out of its vase, arch over, and start inhaling the man’s drink. Each person who sat at the table saw this happen and each one simply refused to come to terms with it. It did not fit in with their expectations of reality, expectations that did not include flowers on tables sipping from their drinks. So what most of them did was just to cast a few furtive glances around to make sure that no one was watching and then slowly slip away to another table and try to look as if nothing had happened.

What are our expectations? Are we prepared to see the unexpected? It was not a flower at all, of course, the one that leaned its head to drink. It only looked like a flower. And yet, one could argue that a small miracle did happen on that table. The flower bowed its wild and beautiful head and drank. The man could not avoid seeing it. No one could. He was a tired-looking man sitting there in his shirt sleeves. Life had taught him long ago not to expect any miracles in this hard world. But there before his eyes, the unexpected happened. So he got up and quietly moved to another table. At this point I don’t know if I feel like laughing or weeping.

What do you expect to see? We all know how limited, how frail, how finite we are and are our resources. We have our limits. But John doesn’t seem concerned with that. No, what he sees is Christ turning water into wine; Christ wanting to give us more faith, more love, more energy, more hope than we can possibly imagine. What if the story is true? What if what we encounter here is a God who wants to give us what we need? What if what we hear in this story is an invitation into a renewed, expanded, more abundant world than we had ever dared to imagine?

Many years ago, on a cold night in the middle of winter, a meeting was held in a church in Cambridge, MA. There was standing room only as the people listened to a young black man, a preacher from Georgia. He shared an incredible message of love: “Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour, beat us and leave us half-dead, and we shall still love you.” Martin Luther King, Jr., understood the lasting abundance of love, the abundant and self-giving love spoken of and shared by Jesus, love that will endure against all odds.

We can walk away, choose not to see, or we can kiss the flower that bows its head to us. We can refuse to believe in the abundance revealed at Cana, or we can dare to embrace the effusive, extravagant, overflowing and transforming joy, of it. “And they filled them up to the brim.”