

## **Water into Wine**

Text: John 2:1-11

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 20, 2020*

The story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, I think contains one of the most powerful messages in all of Scripture. But it seems that a lot of times, people get snagged on one of the details and end up missing the joy of the message. There are several ways in which people get hung up on this story and end up missing the point, so I want to start off by getting those out of the way.

The first stumbling block tends to be issues surrounding alcohol. Alcohol is often a deadly and destructive force in today's world as anyone who has lived with an alcoholic or has faced that addiction themselves can tell you. As a result, there are some whose only commentary on this story is an attempt to prove that Jesus turned water into grape juice. Don't get stuck there. This is not a story about alcohol.

You might find it uncomfortable and difficult to explain to your children, but the facts of the story are that Jesus was at a wedding party where the guests were already soused. Then, when the wine ran out, instead of saying "Good, now go home and sober up," Jesus provided about 150 gallons more of the best wine around. All of that is not to say that there aren't some very good, very Christian reasons for complete abstinence from alcohol. If you don't drink, don't start now. It is just to say that this story is not about that, and if you get too worried about it, you're going to miss the point.

The second thing that hangs people up in this story is the way that Jesus talks to his mother. No matter that Jesus is 30 years old, most people feel like Jesus is at least a little bit rude to his mother here. So they go off on tangents about obedience, cutting apron strings, and the fact that Jesus gives in and does it anyway. Often I've heard Mary's faith examined, how even though Jesus says "No way, Mom," she goes and puts the servants on stand-by anyway. Those discussions can be helpful, but I don't think they're the reason John put the story in his Gospel.

John is a different sort of Gospel. John was not written to get the facts out there. John was written with the assumption that people already knew the facts about Jesus' life—it's even been suggested that John was written as a commentary on the other three Gospels. John is not looking to tell his readers what happened in Jesus' life. John wants to tell his readers what the life of Jesus means...what the core message is really all about. To enter the Gospel of John is to enter a world of symbols and verses that have at least two or three levels of meaning.

John is highly selective about the material that he includes, but because people don't realize that John is talking in symbols and philosophy and metaphor, they allow themselves to get caught up in details...like was it really fermented wine or how dare Jesus talk to his mother that way. At best they end up saying that this is a story about empathy. Jesus sees people who are embarrassed because they can't provide for their guests, Jesus feels their pain and helps out. Good sermons can come from all of that, but all of those things stay on the surface. The only way to get at John is to start out with the assumption that the message John wants to convey is below the surface and the details of the story are just a means to that end.

So, let's go to the story with that in mind. Let's assume that this is not primarily a story about a wedding, about drinking, or about who scurried around to do what for whom. It's in John, so it must be something more than that. The first thing to notice is that John does not call it a miracle. In fact, John does not call anything a miracle in his Gospel. Instead, John calls them signs. He records seven "signs" in his Gospel and changing the water into wine is the first. We can assume that all that is

intentional. This was a sign for people, something that would inform people about what they might expect from this Nazarene, something that would point them toward a deeper meaning.

None of the other Gospel writers saw the miracle at Cana as something worth recording. They were much more impressed with the healings and exorcisms. But John remembered Cana. John saw in the miracle at Cana a sign that served to define the very purpose for which Christ had come into the world. The servants at the wedding saw water turned into the finest wine. John saw a man who in this first sign declared himself as an agent of transformation.

Remember, it's only in the Gospel of John that Jesus is recorded as saying, "I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." This statement, I believe, is what the miracle at Cana is all about. Water, the basic necessity of life, is changed into wine—the symbol not just of life, but of abundant, joyous, and celebrative life. If you go into this thinking wine is evil, you'll miss the boat completely. Wine in Scripture is a symbol of joy and warmth and celebration and abundance. In changing the water into wine and allowing the wedding celebration to continue, Jesus is clueing people in on his mission. Jesus has come to transform the world.

We often think of transformation in terms of opposites. We think of the ugly turned beautiful as in Beauty and the Beast or the kind Dr. Jekyll transformed into the cruel Mr. Hyde. Or we think of change to something unrecognizable like the caterpillar transformed into a winged butterfly or the transformer toys where a robot becomes a boat. And it is true that God can and does transform people in those ways. God does take mean, ugly lives and transform them into beautiful angels of mercy. God does take us when we are crawling along on our bellies and give us wings to fly. God does take us when we are broken and make us whole.

But there is another type of transformation that is modeled at Cana. At Cana, the object of transformation is something that is already good and pure and necessary. There is nothing that needs fixing in the water. Water is good. The message of transformation at Cana is not about making the bad good, but about making the good even better.

The jugs that Jesus had filled with water were the water jugs used for ritual purification and washing. They were there so that the wedding guests could comply with Jewish law. Jesus takes that ritual water and turns it into something that wouldn't satisfy the law. Washing your hands in wine wouldn't count. So for starters, Jesus is making a statement about law. The Law is lifegiving, necessary, good, and pure. But Jesus came to transform the Law into something that was not just necessary, but joyful. It wasn't that the Law was ugly or evil or impure...what they had was good, but it was just the basics. Jesus came to transform the Law through Grace...to pour love into it...to make it more than plain water...to make it wine. Give it texture, taste, let it warm you as the glow spreads through your veins, let it free you to love and laugh. Jesus came to take the wholesome duty of the Law and make it giddy with joy.

And that message that Jesus gave to the guests at Cana he also gives to us. This is not the message about the transformation of the sinner. John gives us that in the next chapter when he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. This is the promise for those whose lives are really pretty good. The transformation at Cana is the promise for those who are pretty much on the right track--those with a basic level of faith in God, who treat their neighbor with respect and mercy, who live a life of basic moderation, gentleness and self-control. This is the message for those whose life is like water—good, nourishing, and life-sustaining.

And the message is, I think, "lighten up." It's not God's desire that we live our lives with only a sense of duty and resignation. It's good that we obey the commandments, but there's more to life with Christ

than obedience. “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.” Not just life, but abundant life...joyous life...life lived in freedom. This doesn't mean God promises us material wealth. It doesn't mean we are promised a life free from pain and suffering. It doesn't mean you'll never do another task you don't enjoy. But, it does mean, that when the water of our lives becomes wine through the touch of Jesus Christ, that even the worst circumstances that life can offer have a richness and depth that they never had before.

So many times I talk with people in my office who only know the God of living water. That's good. That brings life. That makes the wounded whole. But that's not the whole picture. Those who only know the God of living water often come to me feeling guilty about enjoying life. They know that their faith is important and necessary, but it is so deadly dull and hard and tedious—and they feel guilty for thinking that. I worked an Emmaus weekend in Tallahassee, Florida a number of years ago, and another team member came to me struggling with a call to ministry. She felt a strong sense of call. “I'm having a hard time,” she said, “because I want it so much, I can't tell if it's really God calling me.”

The basic problem was that she had a hard time believing God would call her to something she would actually enjoy. She was ready for resigned obedience, but not for joy. When I quoted to her Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” she broke down and cried. God wanted her to do more than dutifully drink water to sustain her. God wanted to give her wine, and to make her wine for others. She had gone to the ritual water jugs to do her duty, and it seemed almost scandal that wine poured out instead.

What I'm trying to say is that there's a part of the Gospel that is about divine extravagance. Not in terms of material possessions or getting our way all the time. Christian joy doesn't spring from the same source as the happiness of the world. Christian joy springs from realizing that once we have made the decision to drink of the living water of Christ, that water becomes wine as it touches our lips. That we serve a God whose name is not duty but Love. It brings not just life but abundant life. It's the shock of St. Augustine's words, “Love God and do as you please.” Joy, freedom, celebration. Not just water, but wine.

What do people see when they look at your life? What do they see when they look at our church? Do they see that we have access to living water? That's good, and those who are thirsty will be drawn to the source of that water. But there are many who don't feel thirsty. They're living decent lives and are relatively happy with their lot. Is there any indication in your life that you serve a God who turns water into wine? And if you remember the story, it's not just cheap wine, it's the good stuff.

Is the call of God having trouble breaking through because you think God couldn't possibly be calling you to something you actually love doing? Do people see our religion as something that turns water into wine or does it look more like turning wine into water? Does your life reflect the miracle at Cana? What would our lives look like...what would our church look like, if we let Jesus turn our water into wine? Amen.