

## Abundance

January 19, 2025

John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

### **Introduction**

I think I should give a bit of a trigger warning for my sermon today because our gospel lesson is about wine. I know that many people are struggling to remain sober or bear scars from living with alcoholic family members. Like many Protestant churches, here at Home Church we use grape juice instead of wine in Holy Communion so we do not exclude anyone who shouldn't drink alcohol or chooses to abstain. Our gospel lesson presents a positive picture of wine because wine had great practical and symbolic value in the ancient world.

I may need to give a second trigger warning as well because our text for today is about a wedding, and I know that weddings can generate a lot of anxiety for people. Don't worry, though. Our lesson is not about Bridezilla or epic wedding fails, I promise.

### **Signs in John**

The Gospel of John is a fascinating book. Over half of the gospel, starting at chapter 13, deals with the last day of Jesus' life and his resurrection. The first half of the books covers three years of Jesus' life, beginning with John the Baptist and Jesus calling his first disciples. In those 12 chapters Jesus performs just seven miracles, far fewer than any of the other gospels. Actually, John doesn't even use the word miracles. The gospel says that Jesus performed seven Signs that revealed who he was.

Jesus turns water into wine, heals an official's son, heals a lame man, feeds the 5000 in the wilderness, walks on water, heals a blind man, and raises someone from the dead. Most of the seven sign have parallels in other gospels, but they are given more interpretation in John. It is interesting that the only miracle that is unique in the Gospel of John is the first one, turning water into wine. We might be inclined to dismiss this sign as trivial compared to something as dramatic as walking on water or raising Lazarus from the dead, and it's possible the Matthew, Mark, and Luke decided it was not worth talking about. After all, many humans have been making wine for thousands of years, just not instantaneously.

But John did not consider this miracle trivial. It was the **first** of seven significant miracles that revealed something about Jesus. And there are some very interesting things about this passage that are easy to overlook, especially if your main concern is whether red wine is healthy or not.

Before we examine the passage in detail, let me dismiss one idea that originated during the Temperance movement. People sometimes say that the wine Jesus made was not fermented since it was new wine. I've read older Moravian documents that recommended using unfermented wine for Holy Communion, which is, of course, simply grape juice. I don't know much about wine, but I do like a good pinot. And I do know there is no such thing as "unfermented wine." It would be like describing a grape as an "undried raisen". I'm also pretty sure that never in the history of civilization has the master of a feast praised someone for bringing out the grape juice. The text says that the wine Jesus made was good wine. But this focus on wine?

The Gospel of John is a gospel of symbolism and metaphor. Wine in the Old Testament is often a symbol of divine abundance and blessing. The promised land was covered with vineyards with large clusters of grapes yielding much juice. In Jewish thought, Israel was the bride and God was the groom, and the messianic age was the celebration of a wedding, a time of joy and new

beginnings. Wine was the symbol of spiritual abundance and God's love. John's story of the wedding of Cana is not just a miracle story about Jesus transforming water into wine; it is a revelation of Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the one who brings in the joyous kingdom of God.

## **Weddings**

It may help to set the scene for you. Weddings were a big deal in ancient times. I know that weddings can be a big deal in modern America, too. I've been to weddings that cost more than my annual salary as a young professor, and I've read about weddings that cost more than my house. There is a huge industry devoted to weddings, and some people plan their weddings for years.

One thing that makes weddings today different than in the past is that they are often a very personal statement. Couples today have wedding themes and try to make their celebration unique. There is an element of impressing people with the show, but in the ancient world weddings were not just about the bride and groom. They were primarily about the extended family. Marriages were almost always arranged by fathers, and the wedding ceremony itself celebrated the union of two families. And the focus was on generosity and making sure the guests had a good time.

In Jewish texts from the time of Jesus, it appears that Jewish weddings often lasted seven days, beginning on a Wednesday. Seven is the number of perfection and creation. Preparations took months, and some people traveled for weeks to get there. Invitations did not just have a "plus one," whole families were invited and most of the neighbors, too. And guests were expected to contribute to the festivities by bringing wine for the feasts and gifts for the couple.

## **Jesus and the disciples**

In our lesson for today, John tells us simply that Jesus and his disciples were invited to a wedding in the town of Cana in Galilee. For centuries people have speculated over whose wedding it was, but the truth is we don't know who was getting married. The novelist Dan Brown several years ago claimed it was Jesus getting married, which is ridiculous since the text says that he was invited to the wedding. It is more likely that either the bride or groom was related to Jesus or one of the disciples.

We are told that his mother, Mary, was there, and that she was rather important since the servants obey her orders. There is no mention of Joseph,

which may indicate that Mary was a widow. Joseph never appears in John's Gospel.

These details are interesting, but we should not miss the significance of the fact that Jesus went to a wedding with his disciples at the very beginning of his ministry. He didn't go just because he was forced to by his mother. He went and brought his new disciples with him. This is especially surprising since some of them had been disciples of John the Baptist who was famous for never drinking wine and for living in the wilderness. It seems likely that Jesus was teaching the disciples that his way was different from that of the Baptist.

### **Asceticism**

Many Christians through the centuries have thought that they should live the way John the Baptist did, by denying the flesh and abstaining from wine. Some, like an Egyptian named Anthony, went so far as to live in caves in the desert. They believed that the way to please God was to renounce all earthly pleasures and withdraw from normal society. This is so common in the world's religions that scholars have a term for it: asceticism. People in many religions have found asceticism helpful in their spirituality, and during Lent, many ordinary Christians adopt some form of asceticism by giving up something they enjoy.

The first generation of Moravians were ascetic, and some lived in voluntary poverty. They did not live in cities where there were too many tempting pleasures. At one time in the early days of the Moravian Church there was even a debate in the church over whether it is sinful to enjoy drinking a cup of cold water when you were thirsty. It may sound silly to us, but if you define pleasure as sinful, then it makes sense. But then some of the younger Moravians who were studying the New Testament pointed out that Jesus not only went to a wedding celebration; he provided the wine. If Jesus was willing to go to a wedding feast, how could the church say that it was sinful today to hold celebrations and enjoy yourself? They also noticed that most of Paul's letters were addressed to people in cities, so there is nothing wrong with being urban. Eventually the Moravian Church changed its teaching and allowed occasional celebration while continuing to teach the virtue of self-control and discipline.

**The important thing** to notice is that Jesus did not withdraw from society or live in isolation with his disciples. John's gospel teaches us that Christians should live in the world while not being worldly. Jesus was not married, but he

did not insist that celibacy is a higher ideal or that it is wrong to marry and have children. For centuries, the Catholic Church has used this passage argue that marriage is a sacrament, but I think this story is about more than marriage. Jesus was not simply blessing marriage as a holy estate, as we say in our marriage ceremony. He was showing us that it is okay to celebrate with friends and family. It is okay to take pleasure in friendship, to laugh, and sing. It is also okay if we may choose to fast or abstain from something, whether for our health or our spirituality, but we should not condemn those who chose to enjoy a celebration.

It may come as a surprise to recognize that Jesus did not condemn the social customs and traditions of his society. Yes, he condemned injustice, indifference, and cruelty, and he called people to store up treasures in heaven rather than on earth, but he did not reject social norms like Diogenes or some of our modern internet trolls.

Jesus came to the wedding at Cana as a guest, not a critic. He would have known that a family's social status in the community was determined in part by how well they handled wedding details, especially how generously they fed their guests. No where in the gospels does Jesus criticize people for being generous.

### **Running out of wine**

And now we come to the critical moment in the story. Mary tells her son that they've run out of wine. This simple statement would have sent chills down the spine of the original hearers of this gospel story. They knew that if the wine ran out, the wedding was over. The feasting and dancing and rejoicing and sense of community would be over. If the wedding ended before the full seven days, the marriage would have started with bad luck. A joyous occasion would have turned to embarrassment and probably recriminations. For the rest of their lives the couple would be remembered as people whose wedding was a failure.

Mary tells her son that the wine has run out. Some commenters have suggested that Mary was criticizing Jesus because he did not bring wine as a wedding gift as was expected. We know how mothers can do that, but I don't think that's what Mary was doing. It could be that she was simply telling him bad news, but I think she was being compassionate to the family. Clearly, she expected Jesus to do something about it.

Jesus' reply is often misinterpreted. He calls Mary "woman" instead of "mother," and that sounds disrespectful today. But in Greek this was common. The odd thing is that Jesus tells her that his hour has not yet arrived. No explanation of this is given, but it is possible that this statement is foreshadowing what comes later in the gospel. In John's Gospel, Jesus says that his hour has come when he was arrested and crucified. Since this is at the very beginning of the gospel, it seems to me that Mary is gently nudging to start his public ministry, to begin the journey that will lead to Calvary.

Rather than discussing things further, Mary simply tells the servants to listen to Jesus. Another simple phrase with deep meaning Throughout the Gospel of John people are told to listen to Jesus. To listen is to obey.

## **Water**

Now comes the exciting part of the story. There were six large stone jars, each of which held five to six gallons of water. That is a lot of water. Often when people refer to Jesus changing water into wine, they picture a glass of water or maybe a bottle, but the jars held almost thirty gallons of water. The jars were used for ritual purifications or ablutions, but Jesus is going to do something different with them. Throughout John's gospel, Jesus takes elements of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition and radically reinterpret them. He is not abolishing the old covenant or committing sacrilege, but he is transforming something that was good into something better.

Water is good. Water is life. Water cleanses us, refreshes us, renews us. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that he is the living water. The servants obey Jesus and fill the jars. They didn't just fill them, they filled them up to the brim. They are overflowing with the water of life, but even the good water will be transformed into something better. Where once there was scarcity (no wine), there was now abundance. There was more wine than the guests could drink. And not only is there an abundance of wine; it was fine wine. Where there is abundance, there should be generosity and sharing. There should be celebration and laughter. Not for the few, but for all.

For John, the kingdom of God is not something that happens in the distant future; it is something that each of us can experience now. The transformation of water into wine is symbolic of the New Creation, the transformation of our souls through the love of Christ. John invite us to join Jesus at the wedding feast. We are invited to let Jesus transform our mundane lives into something

beautiful. We are invited to drink the wine of faith and to live with heavenly joy. What was good is made better, richer, more vibrant.

### **Holy Communion**

We recently celebrated Holy Communion, and we will do so again throughout Lent. We Moravians practice Holy Communion a little differently than most churches. Moravians have long recognized that this story about the wedding at Cana is symbolic of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is the marriage supper with the Messiah. We Moravians do not expect pastors to perform a miracle at communion by transforming bread and wine into the body and blood, but we can experience the greatest miracle of all – that Christ transforms us through love. That where there was a sense of scarcity, of selfishness, of fear, and isolation, he transforms into abundance, into grace overflowing, into the wine of divine love, into the sober ecstasy of the city of God. As we say in our Ground of the Unity, we are redeemed from isolation. May we rejoice as we lift our voices in song.