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John 2:1-11

## WATER INTO WINE

Last Sunday, we heard the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the one with many husbands who is offered water to drink that will cure her thirst for a lifetime. This morning we turn to another familiar story in John's gospel, the story of Jesus turning water into wine.

This is one of those stories that is popular, and widely known, even among people who don't otherwise have much familiarity with the Bible, because it's a good line at a party. If the subject of alcohol comes up, and someone needs a little ammunition to counter the teetotalers, he will often say, "Hey, even Jesus turned water into wine!" And then someone will always respond, "Course we all know that was grape juice!"

This is the text that is used to prove that Jesus liked to party, and that he was no stick-in-the-mud. Except that that's not what the story is about at all, appealing as that might be. Like so much of the gospel of John, one is required to read between the lines and to know something about the world of first-century Judaism to understand what's being said and why it is far more shocking than one's opinion of Jesus as a party animal.

In this mystical gospel, Jesus seems to exist in a parallel universe, on a separate plain, as if he is a spiritual alien. He has arrived on earth after having grown up in God's house, he is the logos, the world made flesh, the one who was with God from the beginning — so there is no need for a virgin birth story or angels and shepherds jumping for joy. Jesus isn't born at all; rather he "arrives" like a visitor from another realm, from a place before time to reveal the secret knowledge of salvation to a perishing world. This is a way of thinking we call Gnosticism and it was popular and powerful in the ancient world. We could not save ourselves or the world, but had to escape it with the

help of an enlightened one. The enlightened one would tell us that we just don't get it, but that we had better get it if we wanted to go home.

Nicodemus — open your eyes; you have to be born from above. Samaritan woman at the well, I know all about you. The disciples are hungry, and he says, “Oh, you're just talking about regular food, but I'm talking about food from heaven — I am that bread. Don't work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

There is a spiritual dichotomy to our earthly existence, and we need an interpreter to help us to see that we are blind, that we just don't get it. And this is fine so long as we don't assume that this is literal language. There is a reason that fundamentalists preach from John ten times as often than they preach from any other gospel: it permits the condemning of the world as lost in favor of the embrace of the sweet by-and-by. In the synoptic, when Jesus prays, “Give us this day, our daily bread,” he isn't talking about heavenly bread, but the bread that everyone needs to eat to live. That's why what I call the “spiritualizing” of the gospel a very dangerous thing in a world of pain and suffering, poverty and violence.

I think the vast inequities of the world stink in the nostrils of God. And I think that before we get all spiritual about bread, we should get enough of the real thing out to more people. I mean what do you really think the Ground of Being of the Universe, the Great Wisdom of the Earth, the Mother Hen of the Cosmos thinks about a world in which we have the best sports stadiums and the worst public schools in the developed world? Or people like Rush Limbaugh, who is paid millions of dollars to spew lies into a radio microphone all day and make people meaner, more frightened, and more violent. He claims that the earthquake in Japan is punishment for Pearl Harbor.

Believe it or not, the story of Jesus turning water into wine has something to say about that. I mean, first of all, this is the first real story in John's gospel —we're only to chapter two — and all that's happened is that Jesus has appeared, gotten baptized by John, recruited some disciples and boom — we're at a wedding party. Jesus has arrived, let the celebration begin.

And don't think for a minute that the image of a wedding is without deep significance. Wedding are not just a big deal today (because they are so elaborate and expensive and often consumed by showmanship) but they were an even bigger deal in the ancient near east. Dowries were being negotiated, torchlight parades were held, the bridegroom would come late to the feast in a kind of choreographed spectacle — there was food and wine, and feasting — lots of food, and lots of wine.

And the subtext that ran underneath every wedding was life itself — sex and passion and the possibility of pregnancy colliding with the possibility of impotence and barrenness and disappointment. Big blowout weddings were once about sending these two off to their wedding bed with a great fertile blessing — the dancing, the wine, the separation of the bride and groom until the last minute — it was all a kind of social, religious, and tribal form of foreplay. We want this to work, and by “work” we mean we want children. We want the blessing that is the future, as a sign of God’s favor — here, have a little more wine.

This is why a certain palpable tension hangs over weddings as well (something I can personally attest to, ever since one wedding that Shawn and I did some years ago at which we were warned that if the brother of an ex-wife showed up at the wedding with a gun he should not be permitted to attend).

The joy of a wedding brings into stark contrast the fears that hang over this absurdly impossible promise that people are making. Will it work? Oh God, please tell us that it’s going to work.

And then not three sentences into our story the mother of Jesus says, “They have not wine.” This is not what you want to hear at a wedding in those days. It was like a death sentence. And here is the first glimpse we have in John’s gospel of Mary, and it’s not all sweetness and light. One scholar put it this way: “She isn’t a naïve young mother gazing adoringly into the eyes of her sweet infant. She’s more like an irritable menopausal Jewish lady kvetching to her unmarried, unemployed son. “[Ahhee] They have no wine.”

And his reply sounds strange, doesn’t it? “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” Sounds a little dismissive, doesn’t it? Lots of Bible commentators have assured us that this did not indicate impatience or disrespect, but I know of no mother who would not, at that moment, ring her son’s neck. “What do I have to do with you? You’re kidding me, right? Where shall I start? With the DNA? The milk from my breasts that kept you alive? Thousands of diapers changes?

To be honest, I think this is the writer of John’s gospel slipping in a little of the “you just don’t get it” Jesus on us. Especially the next line: “My hour has not yet come.” What do I look like, the wine steward? I am supposed to make a run to the 7/11? Hey, this is pre-existence Jesus you’re talking to here, not the caterer.

But Mary’s got more important things on her mind, like getting more wine to this party and fast. So she tells her servants to listen to what Jesus tells

them to do. He then orders them to fill the containers that hold the water used for purification. These are the big pots of water for washing one's hands in a religious subculture where such purity rituals were more than just about hygiene. So the symbolism here is powerful. It would be like filling our pump bottles of hand sanitizer with wine. Good wine.

So good in fact that the steward remarks that things are backwards. People usually serve the good wine first, before people get drunk and don't care what the wine tastes like. But now we get the good wine, and of course Jesus is that new wine, not the old wine of the old covenant but the new wine of the new covenant. And because Jesus has come, the new order has come, and it is all about abundance - extravagant, joyful abundance.

Growing up I used to hear this parable as an example of how Jesus would become a kind of alchemist for those who believed in him, turning our water into wine. I took from this story that Jesus fixed things, solved problems, and kept the party going. But now I hear it as a story that could be deeply offensive to those whose purity rituals, represented by those purification jars turned into wine vats are being replaced by a reign of abundance — abundant joy, abundant generosity, enough for everyone and then some.

Imagine if you will, waking up one morning and going into the bathroom and turning on the tap water, and out comes wine — good wine. And you are thinking to yourself, I just wanted to brush my teeth. This is a story about the love of God flowing into our lives with such unexpected joy that it replaces even our most sensible rituals. We know how the world is supposed to work, but God has something else in mind — and it is radically, unpredictably, even offensively excessive.

What would taking such a God seriously mean with respect to the suffering people of this planet? What if we had the will, as a world community, to do what Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, does — which is to remind us all that what we spend on war in one hour can build a hundred schools, and then the wine of learning can flow down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

What if, instead of blaming teachers and firefighters and sanitation workers for the Great Recession, we taxed the bonuses of the Wall Street barons who pushed us all over the financial cliff so that they could live oblivious to the suffering of others? We are once again trying to crawl up out of a hole that was dug by others who want us to believe that markets are rational and hedge fund managers are entrepreneurs, and if the government will just get out of the way, there will be enough wine for everyone.

The planet is groaning under the weight of a philosophy that everyone really gets what they deserve, and that the marketplace can solve all the problems of life. In order to protect fortunes we have rendered our own government impotent through lobbying and back-room deals. We lack a collective conscience because we don't have a collective ethic. We think the purpose of life is to make as much money as we possibly can in competition with others who are trying to do the same, and if we run out of wine, then let those who can afford it buy more. If you are out of wine, you didn't try hard enough. If you can't go to see a doctor, you deserve to suffer and die. If you ask us to share our wine, you are a socialist.

And then along comes Jesus to say, Look again into those clay pots you use for purification, to wash your hands and be right with God. Look at what business as usual has done to the wedding party of life. You can be clean but still be mean. You can drink all the good wine first, and then when it runs out you can go home, but God wants something different to come out of your heart. Clean hands, selfish hearts, is not the definition of the Kingdom of God.

Forgive us Lord, for our apathy and indifference. Forgive us our long tortured history of colonialism. Forgive us our greed and the way it has stolen bread from the poor. Forgive us the wars we have fought, and are fighting, to make sure our good wine lasts a little longer. Forgive us for thinking that some deserve what they have and others deserve to suffer. Forgive us for blaming you when tragedy strikes. Forgive us, Lord, for turning wine into water, and then using it to wash our hands of the world.

And forgive the church for having long napped on the hearth of the Empire, filling its cup at the tap of special favors, the insider trading of soul-saving, and our suicidal madness that chants, "Drill baby, drill!" That burns the Koran in a Florida church and causes the deaths of innocent people in the United Nations doing good work half way around the world.

Forgive us for being preoccupied with our personal supply of wine, with our good taste in wine, with our luxurious indifference. There is no kingdom, no reign of God, no shalom until the wine steward sees the light and begins to pour the good stuff into paper cups and serve it to the poor.

Why is enough never enough? Because people are empty inside. Because they are drunk on the wine of the world, and have never tasted the wine of the spirit. That's the living water that Jesus is talking about. Drink it and you will never be selfishly thirsty again. Drink it and you'll get more joy out of sharing it than out of hoarding it.

All of you with clean hands and empty hearts, don't save the good wine for yourself. Waste the good wine on those who don't deserve it, since either they matter, or you don't. Either they count for something, or you count for nothing. Either they deserve to celebrate, or this is not really a celebration; just another private party, for the beautiful people, living behind walls, ferried from party to party behind tinted glass, and absolutely clueless when it comes to joy.

Amen.



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