

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - A WEDDING
John 2:1-11
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I am pleased to continue this Lenten series of sermons based on the gospel of John - and again I encourage you to share in the reading of that gospel through this season.

There is something in all of us that loves a wedding celebration. And when that event climaxes in a surprise ending, it is doubly intriguing. This morning I want to talk about the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana and I'd like to cast my comments in a teaching mode.

Let me begin by telling the story again for you. This wedding feast took place in a little hill town called Cana. Cana is about three miles from Nazareth, and it is easy to conjecture that the people knew each other well enough that Jesus probably knew the bride or groom or both. They had invited Jesus and his disciples to the celebration and Jesus' mother had already been there, perhaps helping with preparations. There were a great many things to get ready, for a wedding celebration was not a service and a reception in the culture in which Jesus lived. There was music and dancing and a celebration that lasted often a week! It had already been in progress when Jesus arrived, in fact the festivities were drawing to a close.

. What a fascinating text that is! Early in John's gospel, here is the story of another wedding--in Cana of Galilee--and there is a great feast, a big party, and everybody in town is there. Jesus is there, too, with his disciples; and his mother is there. And at some point, in the middle of this big party, there is a crisis. The wine runs out. The caterer has miscalculated; he was counting on more takers at the cranberry punch table, but this wedding crowd has been far more robust than

he imagined. So there's a crisis.

Jesus' mother comes to him and says, "They have no wine." Jesus is not persuaded at first that that's his problem, but his mother--who appears to know better--winks at the staff and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Well, eventually, Jesus relents and tells the staff to fill six stone jars with water; and when the caterer tastes the water, he knows it's not water. It's wine! And not the kind of wine that comes in those screw-top bottles at the Seven-Eleven; this is one of those high-priced Australian chardonnays or French merlots. Those jars are filled with this kind of wine! The caterer tastes it, and he says, "Whoa!" And, with a perfectly straight face, John the gospel-writer concludes:

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Calla of Galilee, and revealed his glory."

Now there are whole comers of the Christian church that are embarrassed to death by this story. They are grape-juice people, by and large. They are no- nonsense people who take the faith with deadly seriousness; they are "good" people in the worst sense of that word, and they want Jesus to be about more important stuff. Why didn't John have Jesus leading off with a more substantive miracle-feeding a multitude, maybe, healing a host of sick people, driving demons out of a herd of pigs? What does it mean, they wonder, that the first miracle of Jesus, according to John, is bailing out a caterer at a wedding reception?

Well, it's hard to know the answer to that question, but I have a hunch that John is encouraging us to look for signs of the miraculous in more modest places than we might otherwise be prone

to look. Look, even, for what's miraculous about a moment like right now.

This, John says, was the first of the signs by which Jesus manifested his glory. In this little story, John says, we can understand something important about the love of God for us.

One of the first things we want to examine is who is telling the story. This particular story appears only in the Gospel of John. What does that mean? One of the things our children learn about in Sunday School is the kinds of records we have about Jesus' life. We hope they will learn that there is an important distinction between the first three gospels, which we call the Synoptics, and the gospel of John, which is of a different quality altogether. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke rely on common sources. They tell where he went and what he did and said. They are records of a life written by persons who were his friends and followers.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is quite different in kind. It was written a good deal later. It is not trying at all to be a history of Jesus. Rather, it is a sermon about the Cosmic Christ.

Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist wrote an American friend about the difference between the gospel accounts:

"I do not like that evangelism which limits itself to a glorification of the purely human or moral qualities of Jesus. If Jesus were no more than a father, a mother, a brother, a sister to us, I would not have need of him...What I ask is that he be a force that is immense, present, universal, as real (more real) than Matter, which I

can adore; in short, I ask him to be for me the Universe; complete, concentrated and capable of being adored. That is why, while acknowledging the irreplaceable value of the first three Gospels in presenting the historical beginning of Christ, I prefer Saint John and Saint Paul who really present in the resurrected Christ a being as vast as all time."

This is the viewpoint from which the gospel of John is written. If you look at Jesus Christ, says John, you will see what God is like, and he writes story after story to prove his point. Some of them are stories that are found in the first three gospels. But some of them, like the wedding at Cana, are found only in John. So we must keep in mind that John is not saying, "Here is a telecast of what really happened." He is always saying, "This is what Jesus means to me."

What is the writer trying to say? In this case he is saying that Jesus is the kind of person who can take flat ordinary water and turn it into exciting wine. What does the love of God do for a human life? Exactly that...it turns blah tasting life into deeply satisfying living. The love of God is what gives life its sparkle and zest. When you know God's love is for you, it makes life taste so good that you want more of it, not less. To appreciate what John is saying, we need to look at water in Jesus' time. There were several kinds of water available, one of which was well water. Every village had a well and it was the center of village life. The water might be very cool and good if the well was deep, or warm and impure, if the well was shallow.

A good many Palestinian homes had cisterns...some of you may have been brought up in a house with a cistern. You know what houses looked like in Jesus' time. They were flat roofs that

people could go up on in the cool of the evening. Each roof had a runoff into the cistern, and when there were rains, the water ran off into the cistern cut into the rock below. Sometimes the cisterns got the runoff from the street where there was garbage and where animals as well as people walked. You can see that cistern water was an adventure. It had more than a few contaminants. At its worst it was full of distinctive odors and tastes. At its best it was rainwater...flat and dull and lukewarm and stale.

Now look at that water as applied to life. Whose lives that you know are like that kind of cistern water? I'd like to suggest that we see all around us people whose lives are that way. We read their stories in the gossip newspapers on the stands at the supermarket. They are the rich and famous whose lives are tasting so rotten to them that they are trying to blot them out with drugs, with anything that will keep them from confronting who they are and what their life is really about.

But don't think this is something that happens just to the famous - it happens all the time to very ordinary people who have settled for a life that is only half alive. Two men were discussing a third, "Yep," said one, "if Joe had lived for another six more months he would have been dead for 65 years!" What an epitaph! A man who had never understood the love of God for him that enabled him to be freed up to live. He was a man who had missed the wine of life. John is saying it is the love of God which gives life its sparkle and zest. It turns flat or contaminated water into good wine. We ought to remind ourselves of that more often. When our lives are dull, flat and defeated, we need to be reminded that we live in a universe where the spirit of God is at creative work and what is being done in our universe God will not fail to do in us.

But finally, I hope we will discover during this Lenten season that the Bible is a vehicle through which God speaks to us. It is not an end in itself, but a means to hear God's message to us.

I am reminded of a character played by Ellen Burstyn in the delightful *Walking Across Egypt*, a film based on Clyde Edgerton's novel. Mattie Rigsbee is in her 70's and convinced that she is too old to take on any major venture now. Thus, she calls the dog pound to pick up the little stray dog she feeds, turning aside her son's suggestion that she keep it. Later, when she learns that there is a troubled teenager incarcerated in the local prison farm, she turns down the boy's uncle's suggestion that she could sponsor him, and thus get him released. The next Sunday she is sitting in church. **(film clip)**

The Bible is indeed a vehicle through which God speaks to us, transforming the pallid water of her old life into the wine of gospel adventure.

So all of us, have to ask ourselves a question - "What is God trying to say to me in this story?" And the answer to that question for me is simple. God is saying to me that I am asked as a follower of Christ, to repeat this miracle. You are asked to do so too! You never thought of yourself as a miracle worker? Nonsense, John would say, God's love is being made visible in us all the time. How could we make the miracle of the water and wine visible in us in our time? By helping persons to see that in their ordinary experience there is a dimension of spirituality that gives it the zest of new wine. It is taking the ordinary and, because it is given with love, turning it into the extraordinary.

Ray Balcomb tells the story of a group of captured Nazi soldiers in World War II being marched to a prisoner of war camp in Scotland. It was late summer and the day was hot, the countryside dry. The men had been on the move almost continuously by boat or train all day with nothing in the way of comforts and it was a long time since they had had a drink of water. Even the guards were thirsty. Then the column halted and the prisoners threw themselves on the dusty road grateful for even one moment of rest.

One lonely prisoner's eye caught sight of a woman coming out of a farmhouse with two children. He was afraid that they had come to jeer at their defeated enemies, to curse them or taunt them, so he hoped they were just on their way to town. But they seemed to be carrying something, and as they got closer he could see it was a big can and a number of cups and bowls. They came as close as the guards would let them and then began to ladle out drinks of water for all who wanted them.

Years later that German remembered that incident, and as he told of those Scottish children distributing those unexpected and more-than-welcome refreshing drinks of water, he said that in his mind's eye each cup of water became "a chalice of wine on the altar." Changing water into wine! The miracle of making the love of God visible is reproducible by us all!

Friends, that is what is asked of us as a church and as individual Christians. This is what Jesus did and what he asks his followers to do in his name. Therefore, let us get to it! Thanks be to God. Amen.