

## THE FEAST

John 2:1-11

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 20, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 11. It is on page 751 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus manifests his glory in a miracle that few people even noticed. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup> Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. <sup>3</sup> When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." <sup>4</sup> And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." <sup>5</sup> His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

<sup>6</sup> Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup> And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. <sup>9</sup> When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom <sup>10</sup> and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." <sup>11</sup> This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This is one of those texts where we get hung up before we get to the point. And it's not because there's anything wrong with the text; it's simply that we live in a different world than Jesus did. We're concerned about some things that he apparently wasn't. Wine is one of those things. We hear that Jesus gave about 150 gallons of really good wine to people who were already drunk, and we think, *Well that can't be*, and we get hung up on this thing about wine. It's kind of unfortunate, because if we get hung up on this, we can miss the significance of a miracle that reveals to us who Jesus is and the marvelous feast he prepared for us through his death and resurrection.

But it won't work to ignore the elephant in the room and pretend that wine isn't part of this historical account. But we also don't want to waste all of our time addressing the issue of wine and alcohol. So I'm going to address it as efficiently as I can, conceding that I won't say everything that could be said about wine, alcohol, and the problems we have with it. So if you need more help with this issue, please let me know.

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First, drunkenness is a sin. Scripture tells us to “not get drunk with wine” (5:18). So it is a sin in and of itself, and it also has this dangerous character that it often leads to further sin. When used in excess, alcohol dulls the effect of our consciences so that we have a greater inclination toward evil. We can also be tempted to use alcohol to soothe our guilty consciences instead of seeking forgiveness in Christ. This is bad. We want our consciences to work the way God intends.

Second, we also remember that the sin of drunkenness can have tragic effects, both on those who abuse alcohol and those who are around them. For those who abuse alcohol, it can turn into the disease of alcoholism, wreaking tragic effects on the alcoholic. It can also lead to the physical or emotional harm to those around the person. We weep with those who have lost loved ones because of alcohol or who have suffered pain because of it. This is tragic.

And third —and this is the key to help us with this text, but it might also be the hardest point to accept— alcohol is not really the problem. The problem, as always, is our sinful natures. Our Lord said, “**From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness**” (7:22). Whenever we’re talking about sin, it’s usually not the physical object that is evil; it’s the way we abuse or misuse the thing that is evil. A really obvious example of this is guns or other weapons. They’re not evil in and of themselves, but people do evil things with them. So they should be used carefully and responsibly. And you can do this exercise with pretty much anything. For example, when I was thinking about this I was sitting at our dining room table. I saw a saltshaker, and I thought, *How could I misuse that saltshaker?* I could throw it at a person —because pretty much anything can be turned into a weapon— or I could pour all of it on my dinner and make myself sick. Does that make the saltshaker evil? Of course not. I’m the evil one! And you can do this exercise with pretty much anything. But if you do, make sure you wrap it up by considering the right way to use a thing, and then do that instead of the evil thing. That’s really the point.

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But even when we recognize that not all use of wine is evil, we still can’t get around this problem that the people were already drunk when Jesus gave them more wine. This is what we learn from the master of the feast. The people were already past the point of moderation. And Jesus didn’t just give them a little bit more. There were six stone water jars, filled to the brim. Each jar held about twenty or thirty gallons. So we take the average of twenty-five, multiply it times six jars, and we figure this was about 150 gallons of really good wine. I did a little more math and figured that this would be roughly equivalent to 750 bottles of wine. Imagine that. You know how on TV, when people are invited to a dinner party, they’ll bring a bottle of wine as a gift? Imagine you invite Jesus to a dinner party, and he shows up with 750 bottles of the best stuff. That would be strange, right? Either this was a really, really big wedding, or, more likely, Jesus gave them way more than they could handle.

I suppose we should remember that, just because it’s there, doesn’t mean they have to drink it all. To Jesus, all it takes is telling the servants to fill some jars up with water, so why not show off the extravagance of his grace? That’s what Jesus is doing.

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This miracle is a sign. It’s not just a miracle. It is a miracle, but it’s really something more. It’s a sign. And here’s the difference between a miracle and a sign: A miracle defies the normal

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patterns and laws of the world. But a sign is different. A sign can be more. It can still defy the normal patterns and laws like a miracle does, but the purpose of a sign is to reveal something more. In other words, the purpose of a sign isn't really the miracle part of it. The purpose of a sign —the significance— is in what it teaches.

And this is how we should view the miracles of Jesus. They're not just miracles. They are signs. He does them in order to manifest his glory so that people might believe in him. And this is exactly what happens at the wedding in Cana. At the end of the account, John writes, "And this first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him." (2:11). For those who had the privilege of witnessing them, the signs revealed something about Jesus.

And this is the purpose for which the signs were written down for us. At the end of the book, John writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31).

So this miracle of turning water into wine was a sign to those who witnessed it that Jesus is the Son of God. That's the first and primary thing that all of his miracles signify.

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Now it's interesting that Jesus doesn't show off this sign for everyone. In fact, he's hesitant to show off at all. His mother Mary comes to him and informs him of the problem.

This is really fascinating, and it demonstrates Mary's faith. Jesus is about thirty years old now, and he hasn't been manifesting his power yet. He's basically been holding back for thirty years. And, yet, Mary knows who her son is, and she believes he can do something about this problem. So she comes to him, and she simply tells him what the problem is: "They have no wine." This is actually a really great example of prayer. And it's a great example because Mary doesn't actually ask for anything. She simply tells Jesus the problem and trusts that he will do what is best.

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So there's this interesting little side lesson in prayer. This is the way children pray to their parents when they say, "I'm hungry," or, "Billy ripped the head off my doll." Children don't always tell their parents what they want them to do, because they trust their parents to figure it out. They simply tell them the problem, and they trust that their parents are smart enough, powerful enough, and loving enough to fix the problem. Mary prays the same way: "They have no wine." And she trusts that Jesus is smart enough, powerful enough, and loving enough to do what is best.

We can pray this way too. There are two basic warnings Scripture gives us about prayer. It warns us against long prayers, and it warns us against not praying. But there's nothing wrong with short prayers. Sometimes we don't even have to tell God what we want. We can simply tell him the problem and trust him to sort out the answer. Keep it simple. Pray as if God is listening, because he is. And pray as if you already have his attention, because you do. And pray as if God already loves you and wants to do what is best for you, because he does. This is what Mary does when she simply prays, "They have no wine."

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And she actually seems to get a “no” from Jesus. **“Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come”** (2:4). And then Mary shows off a bit of feminine intuition when she says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you” (2:5). She knows Jesus is going to do something.

So when Jesus says, “My hour has not yet come,” he’s not rejecting Mary’s prayer. He’s simply clarifying that this is not the purpose for which he came.

The word “hour” is interesting to trace through the Gospel of John. In the first half of the book, both Jesus and John —as the narrator— keep saying that Jesus’ hour had not yet come (2:4; 7:6-8, 30; 8:20). But halfway through —when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday— John starts saying that Jesus’ hour had now come, and he keeps saying it (12:23, 27-28; 13:1; 17:1; 19:27). The point is that the passion —Jesus’ death and resurrection— that is the purpose for which he came. That is his “hour,” and that is where Jesus is truly revealed as the Savior of the world.

So he’s hesitant to show off his power at this point, because people would get the wrong idea. They might think that this is the purpose of the Messiah —to just keep the party rockin’. It would be similar to what happens later when people follow Jesus just because he gave them bread. If that’s what happens when he gives them bread, how much worse would it be when he gives them 150 gallons of really great wine? Since this is not actually Jesus’ hour, he’s going to limit the number of people who see the sign. The master of the feast doesn’t even know about it. In fact, he goes to the groom to talk about this, because this is confusing. It’s really just Mary, the servants, and Jesus’ disciples who know what happened.

To this small group, Jesus reveals himself in this sign. And for the rest of his earthly ministry, he is able to teach his disciples what it means.

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We noted before that the primary purpose of the signs is to reveal Jesus as the Son of God. But they all reveal something more specific too. In the case of this miracle, there are at least two more ways in which it reveals Christ to us.

First, it reveals something about the character of Christ’s Kingdom. It is a feast. This is one of the primary ways Scripture speaks of the new creation. For example, the prophet Isaiah says,

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,  
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined” (Is. 25:6).

It’s not that Jesus doesn’t want the people to recognize him as the giver of really great wine. He actually does, but the problem is that they might get hung up on this wine and lose sight of the greater feast to come. The wedding in Cana is merely a shadow of the greater feast Jesus has prepared for us in his new creation. In other words, *the best is yet to come*.

But to Mary, the servants, and the disciples, Jesus reveals himself as the host of this greater feast.

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And what is most significant is the manner in which Jesus prepares this feast. There are a few interesting ways in which this sign looks forward to Jesus’ death. Most of the people at the feast have no idea what’s going on. According to the master of the feast, they’re too drunk to know what they’re drinking. They can’t tell the difference between Jesus’ good wine and the

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cheap stuff they started with. But Jesus gives it to them anyway. There's an irony that they don't know what they're doing, and they definitely don't know what God is doing.

There's a little bit of foreshadowing here, because this is exactly what will happen in Jesus' trial and execution. In that case, the people are drunk, not with wine, but with rage. They have no idea what they are doing when they shout, "Crucify him, crucify him!" (19:6). They are so drunk with rage that they can't tell the difference between the Christ and Son of God or a cheap criminal. But instead of Jesus calling it off, he gives them what they want. They say, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matt. 27:25), and Jesus gives them the good stuff. They have no idea what they are doing, and they have even less of a clue as to what God is doing, because God is pouring out his blood to prepare the feast of the ages.

This is what the extravagant gift of wine foreshadows. It reveals to us that God gives good things —the best things— to people who can't truly appreciate them.

You and I are really incapable of appreciating what we have in Jesus. Do you know the love God has for you? You don't. Do you know the anguish he went through for you? No. Do you know just how much he has forgiven you? Again, you don't. Can you really appreciate what Jesus did for you when he poured out his blood and breathed his last for you? Honestly, we have no clue. We should, but we don't. We're just like those drunk wedding guests who can't fully appreciate what Jesus has given us. But he gives it to us anyway, and that is grace. That is grace. He gives his life for us, not because we deserve it, but because we need it. This is what it means to be gracious: not that God gives good things to deserving recipients, but that he gives the feast of the ages to unworthy recipients.

Behold the God who manifests his glory by giving the best wine to people who don't even notice. And behold the God who saves the world by taking on the form of a criminal, shedding his blood for people who don't recognize him, and who don't fully appreciate his sacrifice. This is grace. And this is what our God has done to prepare his feast. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.