

THE JOY OF JESUS' KINGDOM

John 2:1-11

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 19, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 11. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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

⁶ Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, "**Fill the jars with water.**" And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And he said to them, "**Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.**" So they took it. ⁹ 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 ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

The gifts of Jesus are abundant and joyful. We don't fully experience that joy and abundance yet, because the best is yet to come.

We all experience this life differently. You may have what feels like abundance. You may feel that your life is filled with joy. Be careful, lest you become comfortable in the pleasures of this life and lose sight of the blessedness to come. Or you may experience a lack in this life. Your life may be filled with suffering and sorrow. You are, according to Jesus, most blessed, "**For yours is the kingdom of heaven. ... You shall be satisfied. ... You shall laugh**" (Luke 6:20-22). There will be great joy in the new creation, such joy that whatever we experience in this life now will seem like nothing. Whether you are rich or poor, joyful or mourning, or anywhere in between, fix your heart on the new creation. Rejoice that Jesus is your Savior, who has redeemed you by his blood, so that your names are written in his book, and you will experience the joy of his eternal kingdom. Then you may have contentment and peace in this life.

This first of Jesus' miracles is a sign of the joy we will experience in the new creation. It's different from the rest of Jesus' miracles. Most of his other miracles seem necessary, or, at least,

the value of them is much more obvious. Jesus healed people, cast out demons, fed crowds when they were hungry, and even raised people from the dead. Those miracles filled an obvious need. But here he provides about 150 gallons of wine for a wedding celebration. And it's not like they forgot to bring any wine to the wedding. They just didn't bring enough, so the wine ran out. It could be that the guests were thirstier than anticipated, which may mean that the guests have already had plenty. The couple would probably be embarrassed for not having enough wine at their wedding, but, like Jesus says, that's not really his problem (2:4). It doesn't rise to the level of the issues Jesus usually uses his divine power to solve. So it's not like the rest of Jesus' miracles.

But there's something about this one. It's different. Instead of fixing a negative, like healing some infirmity, Jesus creates a positive: more wine for a more festive wedding celebration.

All of Jesus' miracles were more than just miracles. They were signs of something greater. We might look at Jesus' miracles and think, *That's wonderful for that person who was healed*, and miss the point. It wasn't really about healing a blind man, making a lame man to walk, or raising a little girl from death. Those were good results, and Jesus had compassion for all those people. But all of those people got sick again and eventually died. And Jesus didn't heal everyone. More than anything, the miracles are signs to reveal Jesus as the Christ and signify the joy of his eternal kingdom. So most of the other miracles reveal Jesus' Kingdom in the negative sense: no more pain, no more illness, no more hunger, no more sadness, and no more death. But this miracle reveals Jesus' Kingdom in the positive sense: feasting, celebration, abundance, and joy.

John calls this "The first of his signs" (2:11). But before we get into that, we should deal with the offense this miracle might cause us. Jesus made about 150 gallons of choice wine for a bunch of people who, it seems, had drunk enough to not be able to tell the difference between good and bad wine. That might strike us as sinful. It might offend us. Many of us have experienced the devastating effects of alcohol abuse, either in our own lives or in the lives of someone we care about. It might hurt to think of Jesus contributing to that in someone else's life.

But we need to accept that the use of alcohol is not always sinful. It is clear from the Scriptures that Jesus drank alcohol, and he shared it with others. Scripture allows for the right use of alcohol but warns against excess. So if you use it in a legal and responsible way, you are not sinning.

In our culture, we simply have a different relationship to alcohol than they did in biblical times. Our relationship is more extreme on both sides. There are many who abstain from alcohol completely, and that's a safe and healthy choice, because the negative effects of alcohol in our world are much more intense than in ancient times.

Industrialization changed the way people use alcohol. Advances in science and technology have made beverages more potent and more affordable, both of which make excess more common.

It also changed the context in which we use alcohol. Before industrialization, many people worked at home, on their farms, or for a small family-owned operation. This kept them close to home. So even if they consumed alcohol daily, it was in moderation, perhaps at dinner with their family, or at special occasions like a wedding. The context curbed excess. But when many men, especially, started working in factories and such, they developed a work life in addition to their home life. And they started to use alcohol more away from home. With the natural restraints of

family removed, they drank to more excess. There were alcoholics before, but it exploded as a cultural problem with industrialization.

As Christians, we can allow for the legal and responsible use of alcohol. But we must be careful, and we should be sympathetic to those who have suffered because of what alcohol has done to themselves or to someone they love.

And we can recognize that alcohol use in our world is just different from biblical times. So Jesus did not sin by giving wine to these wedding guests. He was not fueling alcoholism, and no one would have considered this gift irresponsible.

John calls this “The first of his signs.” But that statement is more than just chronological. I’m going to get a little bit nerdy here, but I promise it won’t take long. There are a few different Greek words John could use to describe the first of something. One of them is *πρῶτος* (*protos*), which is normally used for the first in a sequence. And that’s the word the master of the feast uses when he says, “Everyone serves the good wine first” (2:10). But John chose a different word when he calls this “The first of his signs.” He uses the word *ἀρχή* (*arche*), which can be used for the first of something in a sequence. But, more often, it refers to the *beginning* or the *chief* of something. It’s where we get the prefix in words like *archbishop* or *archangel*. So this is the first miracle Jesus performed, but it’s also the chief sign. It’s not the most important of Jesus’ miracles. The most important, hands down, was his own resurrection from the dead. But this miracle of turning water into wine stands at the beginning as the chief of his signs. It sets the stage for the rest of his signs.

There’s a difference between a miracle and a sign. And this is essential for understanding *The Gospel of John*, especially, but also for understanding all of Jesus’ miracles. A miracle is a supernatural action. It’s transcending the natural order of the universe. It’s when Jesus or someone else does something that would otherwise be impossible for a human being to do in the course of the natural world. Maybe it’s like Jesus is rewriting the code of the universe on the fly, or maybe there’s another level of physics that he created and controls, but which we don’t have access to. Whatever it is, it’s stuff that’s impossible for us, like walking on water, multiplying food, and raising the dead. Those are miracles. It’s important for us to recognize these actions as miracles, because they reveal Jesus’ supernatural power. But we must also recognize them as more than miracles. They are also signs. If we only look at them as miracles, we would say that the benefit of multiplying loaves and fish is simply to feed a bunch of people. The benefit of raising Lazarus is simply for him to be alive again. Or the benefit of turning water into wine is simply to keep the party rocking and spare the couple some embarrassment. If that’s all we see in Jesus’ miracles, we might not even like him. We might be jealous that he did that stuff for other people, but not for us. If we forget food, we have to figure it out on our own. If we get sick, we might die. And when we lay people in the ground, they stay there. We don’t get the instant fix that those in proximity to Jesus enjoyed.

But they’re more than just miracles. They are signs of things to come in the new creation. Casting out demons was a sign of Jesus’ authority over the powers of evil. It’s a sign that on the Last Day Jesus will cast the devil and his angels into the lake of fire for all eternity (20:10). So there will be no temptation and no evil in the new creation. When Jesus fed the multitudes, it was a sign that Jesus will remove hunger from the new creation. When he healed diseases, it was a sign that he will remove all illness from the new creation. When he raised people from the dead, it was a sign that he will raise our bodies from the dead to live without sin, evil, hunger, illness, or death. In Revelation 21:4, John hears a loud voice saying, “He will wipe away every tear from

their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Jesus miracles are all signs of this new creation. So they’re not just random acts of supernatural kindness that Jesus did for other people. They are signs of what he will do for you, dear children of God, in the resurrection of the dead and the new creation.

Most often, the Bible describes the new creation in negative terms of what will not be there: no evil, no illness, no hunger, no poverty, no death, and no tears. And I think that’s because we really can’t comprehend the positive side of it. The negative side of it, all the things that won’t be there, we know those things very well. And it’s hard enough for us to imagine a world without any of those things. But, even more so, it’s maybe impossible for us to imagine the positive things that will be there in place of every evil thing. We can’t imagine things we’ve never seen before. And that’s what makes this sign of turning water into wine so significant. Perhaps this is why it’s the chief of the signs. It gives us a glimpse of the positive side of the new creation. It is, among other wonderful things, a feast. In Isaiah 25, the prophet 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).

And I really struggle to figure out what else to say about it, because I haven’t been there to experience it. But consider a feast. Everyone likes a feast, I think. I certainly do. It’s all of the best foods. It’s like an all-you-can-eat buffet, but with the finest foods instead of the cheap versions. And you don’t have to eat yourself sick to try to get your money’s worth and beat the restaurant, because it’s still going to be there when you get hungry again. And this feast has the finest wine. Not the kind that someone might get drunk on, but the finest wine. It’s the kind that, if someone knows how to taste it, they can really savor and appreciate. It’s the kind of feast where you don’t just eat out of necessity. It doesn’t just fill your stomach, but the feast fills your heart, because it’s not just food, it’s the best food. And it’s not really even about the food; it’s about the occasion.

Jesus performed this miracle at a wedding, so we think about the marriage of Christ to his Church. The apostle Paul speaks of Christ and his bride, the Church, in this way: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25b-27). The feast in the new creation will commemorate the redemption of Jesus Christ. He purchased his Church with his very own blood. It will commemorate the marriage of Christ to his Church. That is, God and man being reconciled and united in perfect harmony for all eternity. It’s not just eating to fill our bellies. It’s not even eating to enjoy the best food. It’s feasting to commemorate and celebrate the reconciliation of God and man in the perfect righteousness of our Savior Jesus.

So we look at this sign and see that Jesus saves the best for last. That’s what the master says to the bridegroom. “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” (2:10). There are two ways we might take that. It might sound like the master is praising the bridegroom for this. He’s praising the wine, but I don’t think he’s really praising the groom. More likely, he’s rebuking him or giving him a lesson in etiquette. *You made a mistake keeping this wine until now, because your guests can’t appreciate it as they would have if you served it first.* But neither of them knew what Jesus had done, so they’re both confused.

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And that's the way the world looks at Christianity. It's how they look at us. They don't see what Christ has done by his death and resurrection to save us from sin and death. And we might be tempted to lose sight of Christ's work as well. We're tempted to look at this life as if that's all there is. So we try to feast on this life. They say, "You only live once. So make the most of it. Do what makes you happy." But they don't know that "You only live once" is false. Everything Jesus said and did in his ministry is a sign that you will live again, and he saves the best for last. So live for the world to come. Exercise some restraint. You don't have to get everything you can out of this life. Instead, you can live for those around you. Perform acts of love. Seek salvation for your fellow man. Because the best is yet to come. The gifts of Jesus are abundant and joyful. We don't fully experience that joy and abundance yet, but it will be Jesus' gift to you in the new creation. Amen.

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