

“Water to Wine – Obedience to Abundance”

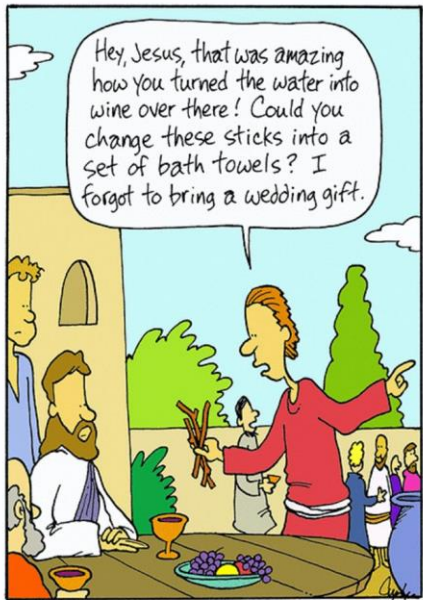
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John 2: 1-11

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Even if you don't know much about Jesus, you probably know that he turned water into wine. Probably the average guy on the street who knows almost nothing about Jesus can tell you about that miracle.

But it's funny, because in the life of Jesus this is not that big a deal. In June I'll have been ordained for 20 years, and I don't think I've ever preached on this story. So here goes.

Part of our challenge as Christians is to tackle some of these stories and look at them with new eyes and see what the Spirit has to say to us through them.



Let's set the stage. Jesus has just started his ministry and called his disciples, and is just barely getting going, when there is a wedding to go to. I love how ordinary an event this is! In the middle of the importance of his ministry and bringing the kingdom of God to earth, Jesus is invited to his cousin Louise's wedding. Maybe not Louise, maybe Phoebe or Rebecca. Actually, we have no idea whose wedding it is, but likely it's very close family or a friend. We know that because Jesus' mother is in the kitchen and she's in crisis-management mode. She is close enough to the bride and groom that she seems to be part of the planning committee for the event. Jesus is a guest along with all of his disciples.

The wedding is going well except for one hitch: the wine is running out! Now almost no one knows the wine is running out. The host, the groom — doesn't know yet, and neither do the guests, but the servants do, and it seems the wine steward does too.

So? Big deal, they're running out of wine. Some have pointed out that this would have been embarrassing for the couple. Wedding feasts in Jesus' time tended to last for several days — they stayed as long as there was food and wine. It was beginning to look like this wedding would be a little shorter than most. Unfortunate to be sure; but not exactly a national crisis. I mean, how many of you have even thought about praying when you run out of wine? (And saying “Oh God, we're out of wine!” doesn't count!)

It's just not a problem we tend to bring up to God in prayer. But here it is a concern of the Son of God. This is not just one miracle among many — *it's Jesus' very first miracle*. So it's probably worth paying attention to.

Let me share with you a few lessons we can learn from this story. *First, if this story is surprising that's because Jesus is surprising.* You can't put Jesus into a square box. Sometimes we think of Christianity as being a square kind of religion, but it's not. You can't sum up Christianity by saying: "Live a good life, follow the rules and you will get into heaven when you die."

Sometimes the story of Jesus is turned into a 'follow-the-rules and you-win-the-prize' kind of religion. Evangelicals on the right sometimes lean too hard towards orthodoxy (correct belief) and will say 'If you believe correctly you will get into heaven'. On the other side of the spectrum, liberal or sometimes called 'progressive' Christians will lean too hard towards orthopraxy (correct practice) and they will say if you work hard for social justice and the poor you will get into heaven. Both extremes are very serious and sober in their faith — and in both extremes, the amazing grace and the gift of life and joy are missing.

Ephesians 2:8 reminds us: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast*".

This story reminds us that the good news story of Jesus is full of surprising grace and rich abundant life. It also reminds us not to come to the Bible with all of our own assumptions about what we are going to find. Let Jesus come to you on his own terms, through the stories and through prayer, and be prepared to be surprised! Don't try to mold Jesus into the image you think he should take on. Remember God's love colours outside the lines, and this miracle is proof of that.

Second: obedience matters. It really is a curious story. So Mary comes to Jesus and tells him the wine has run out. Jesus responds the same way I would, saying essentially: "So? How is that my problem?" She seems to know that Jesus can 'fix' the situation, and instead of responding to his shoulder shrug she turns to the servants and says to them with authority; "Do whatever he tells you to do!" Jesus then orders the servants to fill up the giant jars that are used for carrying water to wash with. They do that ... and Jesus tells them to take some to the chief steward. They do. So the steward promptly serves the beautiful *Beaujolais très très Nouveau* to the guests and compliments the groom on having such expensive wine and saving it to the end.

This miracle was not Jesus' idea to begin with, it was his mother's. Jesus was not a boy anymore, not even a teenager, but when his mother asks him to do something, he does. The servants also obey. I bet they were tired and probably thinking: "So what if the guests go home early? That means we can too!" Filling stone jars that hold between 20 and 30 gallons (between 75 and 113 litres) of water would be no picnic. That's a lot of water (that's a heck of a lot of wine!) I couldn't carry that much water. Maybe it was because of the "*the look*" that Mary gave them when she said to the servants; "Do whatever he tells you!" But they obeyed. Even though it meant work, even though it made no sense, they did what they were told to do.

How are you when someone tells you to do something you don't particularly want to do? I don't love being told what to do. Most of us get our backs up. Most of us would want to say "You're not the boss of me!" Here's the thing: *without the obedience the miracle wouldn't have happened.*

There are a number of other miracles that Jesus performed that required obedience. Do you remember when Jesus is calling his disciples and he is teaching the crowds in Peter's boat? (Luke 5: 1-6) Peter had had a miserable night of fishing. They'd worked hard all night and caught nothing. Jesus tells Peter to go back out on the water and cast his net again. It doesn't make a lot of sense. The odds of catching fish in the heat of the day are not great, and they are tired ... and for professional fishermen to take fishing advice from someone who wasn't ... well again, it doesn't make sense.

Nevertheless, Peter obeys. He says "*Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.*" Luke 5:5. I love that line "*Yet if you say so, I will...*" As he obeys, the net fills so full with fish it threatens to break.

The obedience comes first, the miracle comes second. If you want to experience the abundant life that Jesus has to offer, you need to be willing to surrender your way for God's way. So often our will and our rational mind (or at least what seems rational to us) gets in the way. If you want to experience real life and something better than what you have going on now, you need to lay down your ideas and be open for what God has in store for you. Take the hint from this water to wine miracle — God's ideas for you are always WAY better than your ideas.

The *third thing I notice is that God works quietly.* Actually, what I find most striking about this miracle is that *almost no one knows* about it. The

guests have no clue — heck they might not have even known there was even a problem — all they know is that the wine seems to taste better with every sip (and the women seem to look better with every sip too!) The groom is probably a little surprised but likely figures some generous uncle has come to his rescue. The Chief Steward is clueless: he gives the groom the credit for the good wine. The only ones who know the truth are Mary, the servants and the disciples.

I find it interesting that there is no “Ta da!” moment. Somehow between pouring the water in the jars and the chief steward taking a sip the change happened, but there is no drama, no lights, no waving his hands over the water. Jesus doesn’t wave his magic wand and with a flourish say: “*Wingardium Vintnerosa!*” It just happens quietly and unexplainably. Making water into wine is a pretty cool trick. At no point does Jesus say “Now for my next trick...” Jesus was not a showman. In fact he’s pretty much the opposite; he keeps these things very quiet.

So if almost no one knows about the miracle, what’s the point? This miracle, like almost all of Jesus’ miracles, is for ‘those who have eyes to see’. I can’t think of a single miracle that Jesus performed to show and prove to the public at large that he was the Son of God. Jesus doesn’t do miracles to convince the skeptics. Instead of doing it for the skeptics the miracles seem to deepen the faith of the believers. The last line of this story reads: “*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*” Who was the sign for? His disciples. It’s possible that others saw and just shook their heads and filled in the blanks with a rational explanation, but the ones that the miracles help the most seem to be those who believe or who are wanting to believe. There was no Ta da! But for some there was an Ah ha!

The miracle in some ways really isn’t about the wine, it’s a sign. It’s a sign of what the kingdom of God is like; a sign for those who have eyes to see that the kingdom of God has come close. One of the strongest images for the Kingdom of God in the scriptures is that of a wedding. Weddings symbolize and celebrate the coming together of people, love, life and joy. So I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the first miracle is for a wedding.

At Celebrate Life some years ago, Joe Martelle shared a message based on this story. For him it was a sign of Jesus’ extravagant grace. It was evidence that we were being invited to the party, into an intimate and transforming relationship and the celebration of a life of faith. Joe then proceeded to have something resembling communion using pizza instead of the usual bread — he figured it was the kind of thing that Jesus would

do! I couldn't argue. When you invite Jesus to live in you, you are filled with life. Not ordinary life, not dreary rules and more rules life, but real abundant life that changes you.

My prayer is that you will experience the rich, abundant life that Jesus has to offer. I know that life is hard, and I have no doubt that some of you are very weary from the journey. I pray that you ask Jesus to share your life. You will find strength and grace and beauty.

As Christians, as the church, we are called to reflect that joy and beauty. There is so much darkness and heaviness and anxiety in the world. We are called to bring beauty and light, life and joy!

Thanks be to God.