

“The Party Must Go On”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
September 16, 2007  
Scripture: John 2:1-11

Our Wednesday community lunch at Central has become a huge success. For a while I called it the best kept secret in downtown. But it is no longer much of a secret. We had more than one hundred and sixty people eat with us this Wednesday. Really not a surprise, since Barb Westman is a tremendous chef, the food is incredibly healthy and we simply ask for a donation of \$5 or more. But the Wednesday lunch wasn't always so popular. For a long time there were really only a handful of people who would eat, mostly church members. Then the numbers gradually picked up, to the point where we usually had forty or so. Then, all of a sudden one Wednesday, eighty people came. And poor Barb and her team of volunteers were left to scramble, trying to find anything that could be unfrozen and fed to the unexpected guests.

Now you and I may never attempt to cook for more than forty, but I would be willing to bet that most of us who have hosted a dinner party have shared the following experience in one way or another. There you are, in those moments between finishing cooking and the sound of the doorbell, and as the dinner host you face a question with panic: did I prepare enough food? How many here have done quick calculations on how fast you could get to a grocery or wine store and back home once the guests started arriving?

Some meals are extra special, and extra calculations are needed to make sure that the guests will be well-fed and enjoy the event. Weddings are joyful celebrations, and they are also cultural rituals with heavy expectations that are both stated and unstated. Tensions can surface quickly at a wedding if the unexpected happens.

A friend of mine is involved in a pretty serious relationship. They have discussed getting married. One issue is the cultural differences in expectations for the wedding. My friend would love to have a small, simple, and affordable wedding with just their immediate family members and closest friends. Her partner is African, and his friends' expectation is that their wedding would be a joyful celebration throughout the whole community. In his tradition, everyone would be invited and no RSVPs required. The hosts would be expected to produce a lavish banquet with food enough for whoever would show up. And my friend, concerned about costs but not wanting to offend, is very nervous that they might throw the wedding and be embarrassed by running out of food.

And that is exactly what has happened in this story. It is early in the Gospel of John, and Jesus and the disciples are at a wedding in Cana. The party is still going strong, but the wine has run out. And we can imagine the tension that filled the air. In-laws are meeting, old friends are reminiscing, the young couple is embracing, when suddenly, over in one corner of the festivities, a nervous silence sets in. The wine has run out. Way too early.

What caused the shortage of wine? The gospel of John makes it clear that Jesus and his disciples were invited guests at the wedding. But some scholars have suggested that they weren't really expected to attend. (I've met with couples who issued two hundred invitations, hoping and expecting that at least twenty or thirty would not attend). I'll let Raymond Brown, the preeminent biblical scholar of the gospel of John dispel another notion. "We need not discuss," he says "the ridiculous interpretations centered on the heavy drinking of Jesus and Mary's attempts to get him to go home." One scholar of Jewish wedding customs argues that the wine supply was dependent to some extent on the gifts of the guests and thinks that Jesus and the disciples, because of their poverty, had failed in their duty as guests to bring wine and had thus caused the shortage.<sup>1</sup>

No matter why it happened, the fact remained. The wine had run out. And Mary turns to Jesus and says to him, "They have no wine." Mary seems to have no doubt that Jesus will intervene and is uncertain only about the manner of the intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, however, protests. How did he suddenly get involved in this embarrassing shortage? "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" Why is that any of my business? And then he adds a cryptic, "My hour has not yet come."

Mary directs the scene as if Jesus had not even spoken. She orders the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. And Jesus turns the water into wine. The steward was impressed. Thinking that the bridegroom had produced it from a reserve quantity in his cellar, and following common sense of first century and today, the steward said with amazement, "everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" (2:10). In other words, the party must go on! Try this new wine!

I'm sorry to burst the bubble a bit for anyone who grew up in a teetotaling dry community who has used this story to as religious justification for their own drinking. You can hear it, can't you? "Hey, Jesus turned water into wine, so, let's open another bottle." Well, it is certainly true that Jesus does not seem to have anything against wine but the wine is not the point in this story.

There is a sharper point for the writer of this gospel. In the gospel of John, the theme of the gospel is that Jesus replaces Jewish institutions and religious views. And here, in his first sign, Jesus replaces the water prescribed for religious purification with the choicest of wines.<sup>3</sup>

Standing there at the wedding were six large stone water jars to be used in the rites of purification. You see, in the Judaism of his day, and in too many religious traditions in our day, the world is artificially split between the holy and the profane, between the pure and the impure. This purity system created a world divided between us and them, between those who follow the rules and those who don't, between those like us and those different from us. The purity system required symbolic rituals that would allow a community member who had slipped into impurity become pure once again. The Torah declared that one needed to get clean, by ritual cleansing, in order to get close to God in worship. In fact, in the Talmud, it is specified how much water is needed for the rites of purification. Only about a cup of water was necessary to purify a hundred

men. But here, in this story, there are six large stone jars, full of well over a hundred gallons of water! So, taking these large stone jars to be used a sprinkle at a time to purify, to make holy, Jesus replaces the entire system of rigorous demands for purity and the accompanying self-righteousness that goes with all purity systems, with a lavish and extravagant gift of wine. According to John, Jesus is purifying water enough for the whole world.<sup>4</sup>

The focus in this story is not on the miraculous act itself. The gospel has no interest in how Jesus turned the water into wine. There was no magic spell, no abracadabra. No wand. It all happens in a passive way, according to how the gospel writer tells the story. Jesus has them fill the jars to the brim with water. Then Jesus tells them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward, the wedding caterer, if you will. Only then do we learn that the water had become wine.

Take another look at the piece on your bulletin cover. The disciples are not looking at the wine, but at Jesus. And the gospel concludes the story saying that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana . . . and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11).

The point is, I think, that the glory of Jesus is revealed here at this wedding for the first time. And a wedding is a highly symbolic place in the Hebrew Scriptures, a symbol of messianic fulfillment in which God and people are reunited in love and honor to the end.<sup>5</sup> And one of the consistent images of the final days in the Hebrew Scriptures is an abundance of wine.<sup>6</sup> So here, at a wedding in Cana, at the beginning of the gospel of John, Jesus creates an abundance of fine wine, and performs the first of his signs and his glory is revealed. And along with his first disciples, we begin to realize that the glory of God is to be seen in the face of Jesus. That the holy is to be found in believing in Jesus, not in trying to create distinctions between pure and impure.

Despite Jesus’ initial refusal, Mary’s intervention becomes the occasion of the first of Jesus’ signs. In the gospel of John, Jesus’ mother Mary appears in just two places. She appears here at the wedding of Cana and in only one other incident. The next time he addresses her this way in this gospel, it is from the cross.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus, dying on the cross, has been largely abandoned by his friends the disciples. Just a few were willing to remain with him as the hour of his death approached. And, in chapter nineteen, John tells us that

standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:25-27)

And when we get to the cross, we remember that back at the wedding, Jesus had said, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (2:4).” Now, on the cross, his hour has come. And the party must still go on. “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple whom he loved, “here is your mother.”

Even dying on the cross, Jesus knew that the party must still go on. That there would be work to do by those who would follow him. That they would need to care for one another, for the going would be tough. He knew that the full glory of God would continue to be revealed in simple acts.

And still today, we Christians believe that the glory of God and the presence of Jesus can be found around our tables. That Jesus is still present in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. In the sacrament of communion, of course, but also in common meals where strangers become friends and good food is shared and laughter rings and all are fed. I don't think there will be any wine downstairs today, but I do believe that Jesus will be present around our tables as guest and host.

One last thing. Do you ever wonder who the wedding couple was, that day in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine? How did they remember that day? Kathy Coffey wrote a poem, called "The Cana Couple Reminisce."

That was only the beginning:  
Ached and awkward we were then,  
Embarrassed enough without the wine incident,  
Indebted to Mary's son for flow of joy.

Ever since it has been miracle:  
Touching the shoreline of the other in our sleep,  
Waking warm beneath our roof,  
Hoing the wheat shoots in our fields.

Even the threats brought blessing:  
Brooding death intensified our life,  
Illness taught nurture of cherished child,  
The needy repaid us with Cana's own poor gold.

Our union was not singular; we fought  
And sulked, sickened like the other folk.  
But in every glass of common water,  
We tasted hints of garnet-gold.<sup>8</sup>

Ever since that wedding at Cana, that is how it has been for us. In every glass of common water, we tasted hints of garnet-gold. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John I-XII, in the Anchor Bible Commentary Series, (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 102

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 100.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>4</sup> William Willimon, "Some Saw Glory," preached January 18, 1998 at Duke University Chapel and available on [www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=93](http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=93)

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 104-105. Brown uses the examples of Isaiah 54:4-8 and Isaiah 62:4-5 and also another Johannine work, Revelation 19:9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 105, citing Amos 9:13-14, Hosea 14:7, and Jeremiah 31:12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 99, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Coffey, "The Cana Couple Reminisce," was published in the January 1992 volume of Princeton Theological Seminary journal "Theology Today," and can be found on <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1992/v48-4-poetry4.htm>