

Water to Wine

John 2: 1 - 11

This is part three in a short series of messages, loosely connected for the Summer Season, based on Scriptures that use water to illustrate Spiritual truth. We've looked so far at one of my favorite passages in the Bible – Isaiah 55 – “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters! ... Drink freely!”

Then, last week, we talked about the meaning of Baptism, and we ‘remembered’ our baptisms together. (Thanks for all the positive responses to that message! I'm thrilled that this was so meaningful to many of you!)

** Today, I'd like to take a look with you at a passage from the Gospel of John 2. It's a story that will sound familiar to many people, even if you didn't know exactly where to find it in the Bible. It's the story of Jesus at a Wedding reception in a tiny town called Cana - somewhere in Galilee, but no one really knows... But this is where Jesus (according to John) performed his first miracle... changing water into wine.

This story has as many potential side roads as any that I can think of... so, in preparing this message I had to try to figure out which of them to travel on, without getting us all lost. But, having said that, I still think I need to actually *start* us on one of those 'back roads', and give you my best (short) answer to a question that frequently pops up whenever people talk about this passage, even if it doesn't really impact the meaning of the passage itself (at least, very much.)

I'm talking about the 'issue' of what exactly Jesus created in this miracle. I.e., was it wine or grape juice? Now, for some of you, I realize, this is a 'non-issue'. But I am also sensitive to people who feel very strongly about this. But I have to give you my honest understanding of what we can discern as a 'standard' in the Scripture (i.e., something that we all should follow) and what is simply left personal choice.

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So, let me start with my conclusion, and state very simply: I think you would have a hard time making a Biblical case for complete abstention from wine, or any alcoholic beverage. The Bible, in fact, frequently uses wine as an illustration of blessing, abundance, and joy.

Two times, (in Psalm 104 and Ecc. 7: 12)

"Wine makes the heart glad..." (wine gladdens the heart of man)

As recently as two weeks ago, in that great invitation of Isaiah 55 - the invitation isn't just to drink this heavenly water, but to "come buy wine and milk without money and without cost!" Paul tells Timothy to "take a little wine for his stomach", and in his instructions for elders in the churches he does not prohibit it, but only speaks against "those who indulge in too much" or who 'are addicted to wine'.

People who have a hard time accepting that Jesus would have created something that had the potential for abuse - alcoholic wine - generally feel as they do because of the damage they have either seen or experienced in life that has a direct correlation to alcohol abuse. And I totally sympathize with that - I seriously doubt if there is a person in this room who hasn't been directly effected by someone's (or your own) misuse - or, abuse - of alcohol. It is a massive problem in our society, contributing to crime, highway deaths, loss of productivity in work, marriage breakups, serious problems on college campuses, child and spouse abuse... and on and on.

If a person chooses to completely abstain from alcohol because of these ills of our society, and its potential for abuse, I commend you. The Methodist church - particularly the women's division - was one of the most visible and vocal advocates for Temperance in our country at the turn of the century. The Apostle Paul (Romans 14) tells us that if any of our moral choices leads someone else to fall - even if it is something that we would ordinarily be 'free to do' - then we shouldn't do it. And we should gladly abstain, because of our concern for 'the weaker brother'.

Now, Paul's examples there are things like "eating meat offered to idols" and "celebrating certain feast days. But he concludes with these words:

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*** 19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.*

The choice is left up to us. And this is very consistent with the rest of Scripture, which gives all sides of this 'issue'... but leaves the choice up to us.

However, while you'd have a hard time making a case for a complete Biblical prohibition against alcohol, the Bible is *very* clear and consistent in labeling 'drunkenness' as a sin.

*** From Proverbs 23:20*

*Do not join those who drink too much wine
or gorge themselves on meat,
for drunkards and gluttons become poor,
and drowsiness clothes them in rags.*

Proverbs 20:1

*Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler;
whoever is led astray by them is not wise.*

To the New Testament - Ephesians 5:18

*** Do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit*

...drinking to excess is wrong. When we drink and lose control of our faculties, our ability to choose wisely and honor God, it is a sin. So, when it comes to a personal choice like this, a person really has to know themselves. If you can't stop with one glass... or a responsible amount, perhaps you need to cut it out completely - and you may even require help to do that. I know there are many people in our congregation who are regular attenders in AA meetings... we're hoping to start a meeting right here in our church as well! This is a significant struggle for many.

*** Now, let's get back to our story... C.S. Lewis once pointed out that many of Jesus' miracles (in fact, maybe *most* of them!) are not so much the suspension of natural laws, but the speeding up, or the enhancement, of those same laws. We have mechanisms built into our bodies that fight*

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diseases, knit broken bones, and so forth. Jesus, in his healings, in affecting nature, in feeding the hungry, demonstrated that he was the Lord of nature as well, by manipulating those forces to show who he was to the world.

Jesus, in changing this water into wine, in a sense, is doing in an instant, what nature does every day! (And, friends, the Greek word for 'wine' in this passage means 'fermented' wine... any other explanations of that are attempts to prove a point that people are already passionate about. Understandable as that may be, you just can't do it here.) All I'm saying, is that the fact that this was real wine that Jesus made, isn't all that unusual, as it is a natural process that is known and has been enjoyed (and abused) since the days of Noah... in every culture and place on earth. Why did Jesus change water into wine? Why did God make this fermentation process a part of creation? It is pretty much the same question!

To be honest with you, I have more of a struggle in trying to understand the motivation behind this miracle than I do with the actual miracle itself!

(So, side road number 2... or, is it 3?) I have a 'theology' of miracles, just like you do... although I may have thought about this more carefully than some of you! (Occupational hazard!) I think miracles are relatively rare (that's why they're called 'miracles!') And in a miracle God acts to override Nature, speed it up, change the course of something... for important reasons. We can't, often, understand why God would do that in some circumstances and not others... but I cling to the belief that there is a higher purpose, and one day, I'll know it.

But it's kind of hard to get around the fact that the motivation for this miracle, at least on the face of it, is to either

1. Please his mother... or
2. Help some unnamed guy avoid embarrassment after his poor planning.

Jesus, some of the first disciples, and Mary, are at a wedding. At some point, long after the party has been underway, Mary comes to Jesus and says, "They have no wine". (Even though Jesus

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has not performed any miracles as yet, Mary clearly has an expectation that he can do 'something' about this situation.)

Jesus responds to her with *another* one of those potential 'side road' statements: "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come". Just a couple quick observations: "*Woman*" is not a derogatory term. In our society (and language) it would be. However, it is a distancing term. And Jesus here may have been defining a boundary between himself as the Messiah, about to embark on his public ministry, and himself as "Jesus, son of Mary."

His statement may be something along the line of... "I answer to a higher authority." (That's the motto of Hebrew National hot dogs, isn't it? No disrespect intended!")

Moving on...

Whatever he meant by that, Mary still assumes that he is going to act, and says to the servants - "Do whatever he asks you to do!"

Let's read the rest of the story now...

*** 6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.*

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

11 What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Part of what's necessary for us to interpret this story is for us to have at least a basic appreciation of how John's gospel is different than the other three Gospels... basically that means to

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understand that John's gospel is much more theological - not to say that what he reports isn't true, or to even suggest that he is making up stuff... just that his chronology, and many of the details in his accounts are there to suit the end result - which is, to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord.

So, there are many theological 'themes' in this fascinating book. One example is that this story, John says, is 'the first of Jesus' signs'. He doesn't use the term 'miracle', he alone uses 'signs'. And since he starts by numbering them, people have counted them and realize that there are 'seven' - a number with special meaning in John.

There are sub-themes, too; one of them is Jesus' references to 'being glorified'. When Jesus talks about his 'time' he typically means, his time to 'be glorified'. In John, it refers to Jesus' *death!*

Related to this - but not the same - is the theme of Glory. In John 1:14, we read these words:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So, in other places in John's gospel - including today's passage - Jesus' first miracle, the end result is "Jesus revealed his *glory*". He reveals his divine character, his *true* being as God incarnate.

Another possible theme in John, related to this one - one which is way bigger than we have time to unravel here today - is the presentation of Jesus as the liberating 'new Moses', the one who not only was the agent of Creation but the one who will set the Creation free. John's gospel begins with a prelude that has an obvious connection to the Creation story in Genesis. (Remember, the first three words in John's gospel are "In the beginning..." Where have we heard that before?)

If we think about both of those themes , then this first miracle of Jesus takes on a beautiful hue, as we see a creative act by the one who reflects the glory of God, the very Son of God.

His first sign is one that we may consider almost 'frivolous', and yet, that in itself is telling us something important. This man (the host of the party) didn't 'need' this wine... and beyond that, unless everyone in the tiny town of Cana was present, (and 5 other neighboring towns), they

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didn't need the 120 - 180 *gallons* of wine (to put this into perspective, this is about 880 average sized bottles of wine). He told them to fill *all* the pots... the assumption is that he changed *all of it!* Add to that, the recognition of the 'master of the banquet' (whose job it was to know wine) that they saved the 'best for last'.

** But even that statement, in the bigger context of John is very possibly a significant statement in the theology of John: i.e., saying that what has come (in Christ Jesus) is better than what has gone before!

Jesus' creation of something that was meant to do nothing more (at that moment) than bring joy to a wedding celebration (a very earthly event) and doing it with vast quantity and the highest quality is telling us something about the life that Jesus had come to bring us.

Another detail which is think is significant is the source of the water. Jesus makes the wine from vats of water that were used for ceremonial washing, for ritual purification. Is Jesus making a statement of the "Old Covenant" (i.e., the Law) vs. the joy of the "New Covenant" of Grace in Christ? I think so!

(One thing that I think we can rule out as symbolism, however, is the a reference of wine as 'the Blood of Christ' and any Communion images - as far as John, is concerned, anyway. John doesn't mention any of that, in his Gospel, and other than the wine vinegar that was offered to Jesus on the Cross, chapter 2 is the only time we read the word 'wine' in John's gospel.)

But what a picture... Jesus, the Son of God, coming to set free, and do a radical 'make over' of God's creation. Introducing his followers into a life of abundance (of what matters!) Joy overflowing... peace that passes understanding... purpose, hope - real Life!

Amen.