Book 1

Sunday April 23, 1972

"TURNING WATER INTO WINE" John 2:1-11

All of us enjoy attending weddings. We like going to weddings because they are occasions for celebration; they are happy affairs. This is true in almost every culture and has been so throughout history.

Thus it is no surprise to find Jesus, his mother and his disciples as guests at a huge wedding party. In those days a marriage feast usually lasted about seven days with fresh guests arriving each day. Wine flowed freely at these celebrations.

About the time of the arrival of Jesus and his disciples, the supply of wine had begun to run short. Maybe those who had planned the wedding had not expected so many guests, or maybe some of the guests drank more wine than was expected. Whatever the reason, the mother of Jesus turned to her son, confident that he would be able to furnish what was lacking for the proper conclusion of the celebration. She said to him, "They are out of wine," implying that he should make more wine.

There were present in the room, six large stone jars which were normally used to hold water for the Jewish rite of purification or ceremonial cleansing, each capable of holding between 20 and 30 gallons of water. Jesus asked the servants to fill these with water. Then he asked them to draw some of the water out and take it to the person in charge of the celebration. When the steward tasted the water now made wine, he did not know from whence it had come. So he called the bridegroom and told him, "Usually everyone I know puts his good wine out first and then when the guests have had plenty to drink, he brings out the poor stuff." But he said, "You have kept the best wine until now!"

This story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding speaks to us in our situation today in several ways, and we'll look at these in a moment. However, sometimes we misunderstand some of the miracle stories in the New Testament because we ask them the wrong questions. We ask, "Did it really happen exactly as the writer has recorded it?" "Was the water really turned into wine, or did it just seem like wine to those present?"

Rather we need to ask: "Why was the story remembered by the early church? What did it tell them about Jesus? What does it tell us about Jesus and about ourselves and our relationships to each other?"

What then does this story say to us?

2. ~~1.~~ First the story reminds us that Jesus, God in the flesh, is with us in the common, everyday events of life. He is not above them or apart from them, but rather blesses such things as marriages with his presence if he is invited. God is with us in our joyful celebrations, as well as in our sorrows and tragedies.

The people who invited Jesus and his disciples to the party evidently had no fear that he was some kind of self-righteous religious person who would be out of his element or who would put a damper on their fun and festivity.

Furthermore I am sure that there was no awkward silence at that part of the table where Jesus sat, but rather laughter, merriment and good fun! The story tells us that Christ did not hold himself or his faith aloof from human happiness--a fact that some of his followers have forgotten, making religion an austere affair, always serious and intense, something that identifies sin with having fun, or enjoying oneself, particularly with such things as dancing, drinking wine and the like.

I heard a person on the radio the other day being interviewed who thought of religion as putting a damper on such items as I have just mentioned. He said that his religion had not made him stop sinning, but that it had cut down on the enjoyment that went with it.

On a deeper level, the story speaks to us of the importance of festivity and celebration in our lives. Human beings are by their very nature creatures who not only work and think, but who sing, dance, pray, tell stories and celebrate. When festivity disappears from a culture, something universally human is endangered.

So the story reminds us that festivity is absolutely vital to human life and to religion. The festival, the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while people celebrate some event, affirms the sheer goodness of what is? Festivity always entails saying "yes" to life. It includes joy in the deepest sense. Thus it is deeply religious.

laughter is prayer
of joy — not laughing at someone
My mother's death-laughter is a practical joke

Too often in our time, being preoccupied with producing and managing, people have lost touch with vast reaches of reality because of a lack of festivity. In a success and money-oriented society, we need a rebirth of patently unproductive festivity and expressive celebration--having fun for fun's sake.

A recent article in the National Observor newspaper was entitled--"Relax Charlie!, but he's forgotten how." The article pointed out that as a child, Charlie used to lie on the backyard swing in the summer and wonder at the stars. He could lose himself in a good book or in his stamp collection for hours on end. Then he had the gift of laughter and the sense that the world was mad. But no more. All Charlie knows how to do now is work. And one day when he can no longer work, his life will be at an end.

We have music to read by, music to sleep by, music to work by, and even music to listen to music by. But supposedly no one is expected to sit down and simply listen to music for the music's sake.

So the story of Jesus at the wedding, turning water into wine, reminds us that fun, parties, celebrations, playing games, and dancing are an integral part of life and religion. God does not frown on our festivals and celebrations, but rather blesses them with his presence.

2. Secondly, the story was remembered by the early church because it reminded them that whenever Jesus was present, he added something a little extra. He made the tired world seem alive again.

We know people like that--people who by their very presence seem to add something special to a group. When they are present, what seemed dull and tasteless, takes on a new character, water is made into wine.

On the other hand there are also persons who seem to have the opposite effect on a group--wine is made into water. This process of people affecting people goes on all the time. We human beings constantly issue unique and powerful invitations to each other to live or die, to triumph or surrender.

Some people seem to kill the dream, paralyze hope, cripple joy. Gifts shrivel under their critical gaze, achievement

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dwindles, confidence vanishes and fear takes its place. We've heard people say such things as, "You'll never learn, why don't you just give up." Or here is a person who greets a brilliant, creative story with complaints about a child's handwriting or spelling.

When we are with such people, we feel inadequate to face life, less in some real way than we thought we were, pushed into stupidity or belligerence or terror.

But then there are those splendid, unforgettable people who invite us to live--who turn water into wine. With them we grow and are renewed. They give us a wave of energy to live on, to ride on, urge us to develop all that we are or can be. They call out the best that is in us. Jesus was that kind of person. You, too, can be that kind of person! Give your life to others and it will come back to you.

3. The story of Jesus turning water into wine speaks to us on yet another level. When the early church remembered the story; when the writer of the Gospel of John included this story where he did, he had more in mind than to just show us and point out what I have thus far mentioned.

At the end of the story, the writer tells us this himself by adding the statement--"This is the first of the signs Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, which manifested his glory." Thus the writer is interested in more than just the act of turning water into wine. He is interested in what the act signifies.

The same is true of the other miracles. The feeding of the five-thousand, was among other things, an illustration of the fact that Christ can and does feed hungry souls of needy persons. In the same way, the writer was entirely sure that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but the miracle of miracles was not even that; but that the voice of Christ, of his power, can reach to those of us who are dead even though we a-re alive in the flesh; that Christ can call us out of our own tombs to a new life.

In other words, stories such as this one where Jesus turns water into wine point always to something beyond themselves. In this story, Jesus does not ask that ordinary water jugs be filled with water, but jugs which were usually used for the water of the Jewish purification rite.

So Jesus fills up what is lacking at a human festival of marriage; and of course Jesus always gives us what we need most at any level in our living. But even more than that, the coming of Jesus supercedes the old way, the old religion; it fills up the empty jugs and changes it into something new--that which was water now becomes wine, and it is wine that is much better than any heretofore served.

Note also that when the water made wine is brought to the person in charge of the wedding celebration, he does not know from whence it has come; and when he tastes it, he rightly remarks--this new wine is much better than the old, much better than that which was previously served. Usually the good wine is served first and when people have had plenty to drink, the poor stuff is served, but you have kept the good wine until now!

In other words, God does not serve us as we might ordinarily serve each other. God has saved the good wine, the coming of Jesus Christ, until the proper time, and when it is served it is much better than the wine served previously. Perhaps this is what the early church understood here; they saw that God gave at first the old wine of the law; without too much strength, spirit or taste; but in the fulness of time, he gave the new wine, of an exquisite taste.

And more than that, there is an overflowing abundance of the wine which Jesus gives. Surely this is what the Gospel writer wanted to proclaim when he says that Jesus had the servants fill six jars each holding about 20 to thirty gallons. There is enough of God's wine for everyone and a lot left over. Again, we remember the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the same is true, twelve baskets of left-overs are collected.

So the story says--invite Jesus Christ into your total life, into your joys, your celebrations, as well as your sorrows and despair. He will be at home with you. And whereever he enters, when he's invited, he brings a new richness, a new joy--new wine. He can make the water of our old lives into all that wine symbolizes--festivity, joy and fulfillment. And then you too, can do the same for others.

Further more, when Christ is present, there are always unanticipated surprises. The host in this story did not invite Jesus because he knew he would run short of wine

and thought this would be a cheap and easy way to get more. No, he invited him because he wanted him there for himself. The water turned into wine was an unexpected bonus.

Good celebrations usually contain surprises. That's part of the fun of festivity. We never quite know how it's going to turn out. The life of the faithful Christian is filled with delightful surprises.

Lift up your heads and rejoice, for water is made into wine, winter becomes spring, death is turned into life. It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our ~~x~~ eyes.