Book 11 Sunday January 16, 1983

"THE WINE OF LIFE" John 2:1-11

In almost every culture weddings are occasions for celebration. This has been true in the past as well as in the present.

Thus it is no surprise to find Jesus, his mother and his disciples as guests at a wedding party. In those days a marriage celebration lasted several days, with new guests arriving each day. There was always plenty of wine to drink.

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 reception had not expected so many guests, or perhaps some of those present drank more wine than ~~was expected~~ usual. Whatever the reason, Jesus' mother turned to him, confident that he would be able to furnish what was lacking for the proper conclusion of the celebration. She told him, "they are out of wine," implying that he could get more wine.

There were six large stone jars in the room which were normally used to hold water for the Jewish rite of purification or ceremonial cleansing. 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 reception. 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 the good wine out first and then when the guests have had plenty to drink, he brings out the poor wine." But he said, "You have kept the best wine until now."

In a moment we'll look more carefully at what this story has to say to us about our Christian faith and how we are to experience life. But first I want to make a few comments about stories like these from the New Testament and how we are to hear them.

Sometimes we miss the main point of stories like this one because we ask the wrong questions. We wonder, "did it really happen exactly as the writer has recorded it? Was the water actually turned into wine or did it just seem like wine to those present?"

It's better first to ask, "Why was this story remembered by the early church and others forgotten? What did it tell them and what does it tell us about this person we call Jesus Christ? What does it have to say to us about the nature of our faith?

1. This story was remembered and then written down by the early church because it reminded them that whenever Jesus was present, he added something extra. He made the tired world seem alive again.

We all 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. Like Jesus they are the wine of life.

On the other hand, there are also individuals who seem to have the opposite effect on a group or on us as an individual--wine is made into water. They know how to douse a warm glow. They know how to bring gloom into an event that is happy. They walk around with a cloud over their head.

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, to take a positive view of life or a negative one.

Some individuals seem to kill the dream, paralyze hope, cripple joy--they only carry bad news, never good news. Gifts shrivel under their critical gaze, achievement dwindles, confidence vanishes and fear takes its place. Nothing is ever good enough. They say such things as--"You'll never learn, why don't you just give up." Or they greet a brilliant, creative story by a child with complaints about the 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, magnificent, 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, and urge us to develop all that we are or can be. They call out the best in us and we are glad to be in their presence or have them around. Each one of us can be that kind of person. Our Christian faith calls us to be just that. And that's what the disciples remembered about being in the presence of Jesus.

2. Secondly, the early church remembered this story of the water made into wine at a wedding reception, because it reminded them and it reminds us that God is with us in the common everyday events of life--in our joy as well as in our sorrow.

Jesus Christ, God's love in the flesh, was not above such events or apart from them but rather blesses such things as marriage celebrations with his presence if he is invited.

The people who invited Jesus and his disciples to the party evidently had no fear that they would be self-righteous religious people who would put a damper on the whole affair.

The story reminds us that Jesus did not hold himself aloof from human happiness--a fact that some of his later day followers have forgotten. They try to make religion into an austere affair, always serious and intense while identifying sin with having fun, or enjoying oneself.

I heard a person who was being interviewed on the radio the other day say that he thought of religion as putting a damper on having fun. 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 this story of Jesus at the wedding celebration and turning water into wine, 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, laugh, pray, tell stories and celebrate. When festivity disappears from a culture, something universally human is endangered.

So this story reminded the early church and it reminds us that festivity is absolutely vital to human life and to our Christian faith. The festival, the special time

when ordinary chores are set aside while people celebrate some event, affirms the sheer goodness of what is! Festivity is a way of saying "yes" to life. It includes joy in the deepest sense.

In fact, I believe that laughter is a form of prayer. The laughter I'm speaking of is not the laughter of the practical joke, or the laughing at someone but the smiles and laughter that come from the joy of being together.

I still remember the laughter that took place among my brothers and sisters and our families while we were all together for my mother's funeral a number of years ago. It was not only therapy, but it was also a form of prayer.

So often we are preoccupied with producing and managing that we lose touch with a part of ourselves that has to do with fun, festivity and laughter. We forget that Christ is the wine of life in addition to being the bread of life.

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

3. Thirdly, the story of Jesus turning water into wine speaks to us on yet another level. When the early church remembered the story; the writer of the Gospel of John included it where he did because he had more in mind than what we have already 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 also interested in what the act points to.

The same is true of the other miracle stories. The feeding of the five-thousand was among other things an illustration of the fact that Christ can and does feed hungry souls. In the same way the Gospels are entirely sure that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but the miracle of miracles was more than that; it is that the power of Christ can

reach to those of us who are dead even though we are 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, for example, 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 provides what is lacking at a human festival, but more than that, God's love as demonstrated in 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. The emptiness in our lives is filled with more than we asked for. Jesus is the wine of life.

Note also that when the water now made wine is brought to the person in charge of the wedding reception, 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!

God does not serve us as we might ordinarily serve others. God has saved the good wine, the coming of Christ until the proper time and when it is served it is much better than any wine previously served. 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, came the new wine and it is the wine of life.

And more than that, there is an overflowing abundance of this new wine which Christ provides. There is enough of the wine of life for everyone in the whole world.

So this story from the Gospel of John is saying--invite Jesus Christ into your life, into your total life, into your joys as well as your sorrows and despairs. He will be at home with you. And wherever he enters, when he's

invited, he brings a new richness, a new joy, the wine of life as well as the bread of life. He can make the water of our old lives into all that wine rightly symbolizes--festivity, joy and fulfillment. And then you too can do the same for others.

And when we invite the love of God into our lives 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 an easy and cheap way to get more. No, he invited him because he wanted him there for himself. The water turned into wine was an unexpected bonus.

So this morning, 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 eyes. Amen.