Sunday, January 14, 2001
THE GOOD WINE
John 2:1-11

"On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'" (John 2:1-2)

The main point of a Bible story is not always what it first seems to be. This brief story about a wedding celebration is a good example of that principle. Here, the writer of the Gospel of John uses a story of a wedding reception as the vehicle for telling his readers some very important truths about the nature of Jesus' ministry. The last sentence of the story is the key: "Jesus did this (turned the water into wine), the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory."

Sometimes we miss the main point of stories like this one because we ask the wrong questions. Whose wedding was it? Was it the first or second marriage? Was the bride an additional wife for the groom? We need to remember that polygamy was still being practiced in those days and that wives were considered the property of the husband. Were the bride and groom relatives of Jesus? Was the water really turned into wine, or did it only seem like wine to those present?

It's better to ask: why was this story remembered by the early church and later written down by the writer of the Gospel of John when other stories about Jesus were forgotten? What did it tell the early church, and what does it tell us about Jesus and his ministry? What does it have to say about the nature of our faith? Stories such as this one always point to something beyond the details of the story. They are rich in symbolism, especially in the Gospel of John.

Here are some of the key points in the story which reveal its deeper meaning. The first is this: the supply of wine was inadequate. The early church would use this statement to remind them that only Jesus, the Son of God, would be able to furnish what was lacking in their lives. The old religious forms were empty; new wine was needed. Your life and my life can run dry. Our lives can lose meaning and purpose. Only the wine provided by God's Spirit is the really good wine.

Where does this good wine come from? Here's the second key point and symbol in the story. We are told there were six stone jars standing there, but these were not ordinary, everyday stone jars. They were special water jars used for the Jewish rite of purification, and they were big ones — each capable of holding twenty or thirty gallons. So Jesus told some of the servants to fill these six special containers with water. And they filled them to the brim.

You can see the symbolism. God's love, present in Jesus, supersedes the old way, the old religions. You don't throw out the old containers but rather fill them with the new. In the wedding reception story, it's significant that the old containers were empty, but now they are filled with the new. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," is the way St. Paul describes it in one of his letters.

Here's the third key element in the story: when the water, now made wine, is brought to the steward (the man in charge of the wedding reception), he tasted it but did not know where it came from.

There are many people who taste the wine of God's Spirit in their lives but do not know its origin. There are many people who practice unconditional love toward others but do not know that the origin of all love is from God. Jesus implied this in his parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew's Gospel, in the 25th chapter. He describes individuals who are welcomed into God's realm and are told, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." And they respond in surprise and ask: "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And God tells them, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Notice the next key element in the story. When the person in charge, that is, the head waiter, tastes the water now made wine, he declares, "This new wine is much better than that which was first served." And he goes on to say, "Usually the good wine is served first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

The early church was remembering that God does not serve us as we usually serve others. God does not play tricks on us and give us inferior wine because we might not know the difference. God has saved the good wine until last, and when it is served, it is much better than any wine previously served. Added to that is the fact that there is an overflowing abundance of this good wine which God provides, and there is no better wine anywhere. There is enough of God's love for all of creation and everyone in it, and even more.

Now let's go deeper into the meaning of this story and use our imagination to discover what it adds to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus, in addition to the rich symbolism that has already been noted. We are going to examine its broad application to everyday life.

The story of Jesus being present at the wedding reception and turning the water into wine tells us that whenever God's Spirit, as revealed in Jesus, is acknowledged as being present in our midst today, something extra is added. Water is made into wine.

We all know people like that — individuals who, by their presence, seem to add something special to the gathering. When they are present, what seems empty or dull takes on a new character.

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

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 toward life or a negative one.

Some individuals seem to work at killing the dream, paralyzing hope, and crippling joy. They only carry bad news, never good news, and are disappointed when others are happy. Gifts shrivel under their critical gaze, achievement dwindles, confidence vanishes, morale sags, and fear replaces courage. Nothing is ever good enough. They say such things as, "You'll never

learn. Why don't you give up? You're too clumsy. You have no talent." They greet a beautiful, creative story by a child with complaints about the child's handwriting or spelling.

When you are with such people, you are diminished. You feel inadequate to face life. You feel less, in some real way, than you thought you were.

On the other hand, there are those splendid, magnificent, unforgettable people who invite us to life, who turn water into wine. Their presence encourages you to grow, and you are renewed. They give you a wave of energy to live on and urge you to develop all that you are or can be. They call out the best in you, and you are glad to be in their presence or have them around. You call them the life of the party. Each one of us has the potential to be that kind of person. Our Christian faith calls us to be that. That's what the early followers of Jesus remembered about being in his presence. He added something positive and life-affirming.

The early church also remembered this story of water made into wine at a wedding party because it reminded them that God is with us in the everyday events of life, in our times of sorrow and our times of celebration.

Jesus, God's love uniquely focused in a human being, was not above such events or apart from them, but rather blesses such occasions as marriage celebrations, births of babies, holiday gatherings, retirement parties, promotion celebrations, and our everyday meals together.

The people who invited Jesus and his disciples to the wedding party had no fear that they would be self-righteous, dismal religious people who would put a damper on the celebration. The story tells us that God is intimately present in human happiness and in loving relationships. This is a fact that some people of faith seem to forget. They try to make religion into an austere affair, serious, intense, and gloomy. They identify sin with having fun or enjoying oneself.

I heard a person who was being interviewed on the radio recently say that he thought of religion as putting a damper on having fun. He said that his religious faith had not made him stop sinning, but that it had cut down on the enjoyment that went with it.

On yet another level, this story of Jesus being present at a party and turning water into wine tells us that festivity and celebration are a vital part of life as God intends it. A major purpose of life is to glorify God and enjoy God. We human beings are, by nature, creatures who not only work and think and experience sorrow, but also creatures who sing, dance, laugh, tell stories, and celebrate. When festivity and joy disappear from one's life or from culture, then something very holy is endangered.

Thus, stories like this one tell us that in God's creation, festivity is absolutely vital to human life. It's an integral part of our Christian faith. The festival — the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while people celebrate some event — affirms the sheer goodness of God's creation. Festivity, at its best, is a way of saying "yes" to life. It includes joy at the deepest level. It is evidence of God's Spirit alive among us.

In fact, I believe that genuine laughter can be 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 siblings and our families while we were together for the several days surrounding our mother's funeral many years ago. Someone walking in on us during those times when we were remembering events of the past and laughing together about them would've thought we were happy about our mother's sudden death. Far from it. We also had times of extreme grief and sadness. Both were a part of the healing process and a way of expressing our joy in each other's presence. That laughter was a form of prayer.

It's so easy to get preoccupied with producing and managing so that we lose touch with that part of ourselves that has to do with fun, festivity, and the laughter that goes with it. We can forget that God's love, supremely focused in Jesus, is the wine of life as well as the bread of life.

So this little story from the Gospel of John, which on the surface is about a wedding celebration, is much more. It is saying: invite God's love into your total life, into your joys as well as your sorrows and despairs. God's love will be at home with you. And wherever that love enters, when it is invited, it brings a new richness — it is always good wine.

In addition, when you invite the love of God into your life, there are always unanticipated surprises. Jesus and his disciples were not invited to the wedding reception because those in charge were worried about running short of wine and thought this would be an easy and inexpensive way to get more. They were invited because the host and hostess wanted them there for themselves. The water turned into good wine was an unexpected bonus.

So today, lift up your heads and rejoice, for water is turned into wine, winter becomes spring, and death is turned into life. It is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Amen.