Sunday January 18, 2004

WATER INTO WINE

John 2:1-11

One of the decisions that couples being married need to make is who to invite to the wedding. Usually, the parents of the bride and groom are consulted. Sometimes there is conflict over the issue. If you read the "advice columns" in the newspaper, you will find letters on this question. A soon-to-be bride asked: "Do we have to invite the woman friend my father is living with since he divorced my mother?" Someone else wrote: "My uncle Louie drinks too much and his personal hygiene is terrible. I know he's my dad's brother, but does he have to be invited?"

It is not known if there was any discussion about the invitation list to the marriage celebration to which Jesus and his disciples were invited. The story simply says: “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding.” Were Jesus and his disciples invited because his mother was on the guest list? No one knows.

It can be revealing to have a discussion on the question: if you were having a party, what three people from history would you want to invite? Would your list of three people include Jesus? When I’ve asked this question, some people have said, “no.” When I asked why, they implied his

presence might keep some of the others who were there from having any fun. On the other hand, there were others who knew the story about Jesus at the wedding party in Cana. They told me it not only would be fun to have him present but also helpful—if the wine ran out, he could make some more and it would turn out to be the best.

From what I know about Jesus from reading the stories in the Bible, I am convinced that he would be the life of the party. He was the kind of person who added joy to a gathering. It's helpful to remember that according to the gospel of John the first miracle he performed was to redeem a wedding celebration, a party.

It's a beautiful story that is rich with symbolism. John's gospel uses the story as the vehicle for telling his readers some very important truths about the ministry of Jesus and the nature of God which he came to more fully reveal. The last sentence of the story says, "Jesus did this, (turned water into wine), the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory."

It's possible that there are those who might be upset because Bible stories such as this one use wine as a symbol of abundance and celebration when problems with alcohol in this culture contribute to broken homes, shattered lives and death on the highways. That's because wine and

other alcoholic beverages are often misused today. They are not always used in the celebration of life, but in an attempt to escape from life. Some of the partying takes on an air of frenzy, as people seek to anesthetize themselves from the problems of life rather than face them.

The exact opposite is suggested by a wedding celebration. It is an immersion in life, not a flight from it. It is a summons to make a commitment. Wine can be a useful metaphor if it is correctly interpreted.

Now let's look more carefully at the content of the glory of God which Jesus revealed with this miracle and then how it applies to your daily life.

Here are some of the key symbols in the story which reveal its deeper meaning. The first one is this: the story says the supply of wine was inadequate. The church throughout history has used this statement as a reminder that Jesus, the Son of God, makes up for this lack. The old religious rituals and purity rules were empty, a fresh supply of wine was needed. The story wants to remind you that your life can also run dry. Your life can lose meaning and purpose. Only the wine provided by God's Spirit is the truly good wine.

Where does this good wine come from? Here's the second crucial symbol in the story. You are told that there were six stone jars standing there, but these were not ordinary stone jars. They were

consecrated water jars used to hold water which would be used for the Jewish rite of purification. They were large containers, each capable of holding twenty or thirty gallons. It was these jars that Jesus told the servants to fill with water.

You can see the symbolism. God's love present in Jesus supercedes the old way, the old religious systems. You don't throw out the old containers, but rather fill them with the new. It's significant that in this story, these old containers were empty. 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 a third truth revealed in the symbolism of this beautiful story. The people who tasted this new wine at the wedding party did not know its origin. You can be filled with the Spirit of God and not be aware of it. There are individuals who live a life of unconditional love in their treatment of others and do not know it. Jesus described this in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew's gospel in the 25th chapter. He said there are people who are welcomed into God's realm and are told, "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."

These good people 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? When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 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 powerful symbol in the story. When the person in charge of the party tastes the water now made wine, he declares, "This new wine is much better than that which was served earlier." He goes on to say, "Usually the good wine is served first and then the inferior wine later after the guests

have become drunk and they don't know the difference, but you have kept the good wine until now."

The story is reminding you that God does not serve you as you might be tempted to serve others. God does not play tricks on you and give you inferior wine when you might not know the difference. God gives you the best. Furthermore there is an overflowing abundance of God's goodness which is represented by the good wine. There is more than enough of God's love for all people and all creation.

This is a story of abundance in situations where people think there is scarcity. This abundance is

extravagant, exaggerated, joyous and overdone. God's goodness splashes all over the place. This symbol of God's overflowing abundance is not unique in the Bible. It reminds you of the story of God's good creation where there is enough for all; and the stories of God feeding the people of Israel in the wilderness with food left over. Later in John's gospel there is the story of Jesus taking a little boy's lunch and uses it to feed 5000 people and there is still food left over.

There are forces in the world that give a different message. You can be invited to a another kind of party where the emphasis is on hoarding the good wine, keep it to yourself, get everyone blasted and pass off the cheap wine, give in order to keep

others obligated to you, get away with anything you can, look out only for yourself, betray others and be the last one to be voted off the island. The message of Jesus is the opposite. It says that survival isn't about voting people out, it's about welcoming people in.

Yet there are those who want you to believe that there is never enough and that you have a party and celebrate when you get more than your share.

This story of water into wine has so many applications in your daily life and mine. You are reminded in this story that whenever you invite the loving Spirit of God as revealed by Jesus into your

life, water is turned into wine. Something extra is added.

I'm sure you know individuals who by their presence add something special to a gathering. When they are present, what might have seemed a bit dull or empty, takes on a new character.

On the other hand, there are also people who can have the opposite effect on a gathering or on you as an individual—wine is made into water. They know how to douse a warm glow. They add gloom to an event which is supposed to be joyful. They are like the cartoon character in "Peanuts" who walks around with a cloud over his head.

This remarkable process of people affecting people goes on all the time. Human beings are constantly even without knowing it, issuing unique and powerful invitations to each other to live or die, to triumph or surrender, to take a positive attitude toward life or a negative one.

There are individuals who appear to work at killing your dreams, paralyzing your hopes, crippling your joy. They carry only bad news, never good news and are disappointed when others are happy. When you are in the presence of such people, you are

diminished. Wine is made into water.

On the other hand there are those splendid, magnificent, unforgettable people who invite you 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 inspire you to be all that you are meant to be. They call out the best in you and you are glad to be in their presence. Water is made into wine. You are called to be one of them. You can turn water into wine.

A woman I know was a patient in the hospital and was not up to eating. The woman in the bed beside her also had no appetite. They lay in their separate beds, waiting for time to pass and for the loneliness and pain they felt to pass also. A sense of

hopelessness and had settled over the room like a thick fog.

Her roommate's husband made a surprise visit. He was a truck driver who had been on a weekend run and was not expected back until the next day. He talked softly and gently with his sick wife and they had a prayer together. As he was leaving the room, he stopped by the bedside of the woman I know. He asked her if there was anything she needed. She said, no. But he must have known it was not true. He took a washcloth and rinsed it with warm water and gently washed her exhausted, tear-streaked face.

The ordinary becomes extra-ordinary. The water becomes the wine of gentle, healing compassion. The simplest acts of love and caring can turn water into wine. You can do it too. You can turn water into wine.

I am convinced that those who invited Jesus and his disciples to be at their wedding party had no fear that they would be dismal, self-righteous people who would put a damper on their celebration.

What people forget is that the New Testament is the most joyful book in the world. It opens with joy over the birth of Jesus; and it ends with a superb picture of multitudes of people singing hallelujah choruses.

On the two special occasions when Jesus took special effort to explain his conduct to his enemies, he told them why he and his disciples were so joyful. He said that the reason for his joyfulness was based on a two universal principles. The first is that the happiest people on earth are those who are doing the most for others. The second is that the happiest people in the world are those who can rejoice at the success of others. Related to this, he had the most joyous idea of God that ever was. He knew that a major purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

It is my hope that each one of you and this congregation together will continue to wipe the tears from the faces of whose who are in pain and

who suffer because of injustice in the world. Then you, like Jesus, will continue to turn water into wine. Amen.