

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “The Wine of Grace” (John 2:1-11)**

**January 17, 2010**

Today I’m preaching on the Gospel passage about Jesus’ first public miracle, when he changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Cana was a very small village, and so the wedding was no doubt a community-wide event. Everyone of note in Cana was there, as were friends and family from neighboring villages, like Nazareth, so Jesus, his mother Mary, and some of his disciples were at the wedding too. The wedding was going well, everyone probably having a great time—some were even doing the *Electric Slide*—and then things came to a screeching halt because the wine ran out.

In Jesus’ day running out of wine at a wedding reception was not a mild social *faux pas*, it was considered extremely rude to the guests who had attended the wedding bearing gifts for the new couple. In fact, it was more than rude, it was offensive, so much so that there are actual records from Jesus’ day of family’s being sued for running out of wine at a wedding—no joke. So the wedding families found themselves facing an embarrassing and potentially threatening situation both socially and legally because “the wine gave out” (John 2:3).

And when the wine gave out, that’s when Mary turned to Jesus. “They have no wine,” she told him.

And that’s often when we turn to God. We turn to God when we run out of something. We turn to God when we run out of strength, when we run out of money, when we run out of options. We turn to God when we run out of passion, when we run out of patience, when we run out of perseverance. We turn to God when we run out of hope or run out of joy. We turn to God when we’re feeling beat-up and burned out. We turn to God when the game is up, when our sin has found us out, when we realize that we need help. We turn to God when the gauge of our emotional or psychological tank is way past the red line marked “E” for “empty.” We turn to God when we realize we need help, when we see that our addictions are self-destructive and hurtful to others, when we hit rock bottom. We turn to God when we run out of something.

The good news of the gospel is that God meets us where we have run out, that God meets us in the place of our need.

That’s what Jesus did at the wedding, even though at first it didn’t look that way. When Mary told him the wine had run out, Jesus initially replied, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” At first it appears that Jesus is being rude to his mother. After all, what son addresses his mother as “woman”? And yet in Jesus’ day this expression was one of

affection. In fact, there is second time in John's account of the gospel when Jesus addresses his mother as "woman," but we'll get to that later.

It's not that Jesus didn't care about the wine running out; it's that he knew he had come for a different purpose, he knew his "hour" had not come yet—again, we'll look at that later.

We know Jesus cared about the wine running out because he did *not* say, "Good. I'm glad the wine ran out. You shouldn't ever drink wine anyway, because wine is evil." Jesus didn't reprove the wedding families for not planning properly. Jesus didn't chastise the people for drinking too much. But Jesus would indeed do something. In fact, Mary *knew* he would do something because in spite of Jesus' initial response she told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus sees six huge "stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification." The Jews in Jesus' day had elaborate cleansing rituals in order to feel like they had purified themselves before eating, etc. Each of these jars held twenty to thirty gallons of water. Jesus says to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." When Mary told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you," they took it to heart, because John tells us that "they filled them up to the brim."

Then Jesus told the servants to take some to the chief steward, so they did, and the chief steward tasted "the water that had become wine"—and not cheap wine, but the best wine (*Make Mine Virginia Wine* ☺). Instead of the bridegroom being chided for running out of wine and living with the stress of a potential lawsuit, he was complemented for saving the best wine for last. Jesus changed the water into the best wine you could imagine. Jesus did that because he cares about every detail in our lives, including whether we run out of wine at a wedding. God cares about every detail in our lives. He even knows how many hairs are on our heads (Matthew 10:30), although for some of us that's not so complicated ☺. Think about your life for a moment. What are your cares, preoccupations, and concerns right now, today? Are there things in your life that you care about that even those closest to you might not care so much about? God cares about those things too because God cares about you. God cares about every detail in your life.

But there's more to Jesus' miracle of changing water to wine, much more.

John writes that "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and *revealed his glory*." John records seven such signs in his account of the gospel—Jesus' changing water into wine, healing a little boy, healing a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, feeding the five thousand, walking on water, healing a man born blind, and raising Lazarus from the dead—all as *signs* of God *revealing his glory* in Jesus Christ, all as demonstrations that Jesus Christ is more than a great teacher or prophet, that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In the prologue of John's gospel we see this: "And the Word (Jesus)

became flesh and lived among us, and *we have seen his glory*, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). When Jesus' changed the water into wine he was revealing his glory.

*He was also revealing his grace.* Remember what the huge stone water jars were for? They were vessels for the water needed for ritual cleansing—six huge stone jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons of water—gallons and gallons of water for the sake of people trying to make themselves clean before God with rituals they had made up. Jesus fills these same huge stone jars with wine, the best wine you could imagine, as a free gift to people who had found themselves in a situation in which they had run out.

*You could say that Jesus changed the water of the law into the wine of grace.* This also reflects these words of John from the prologue: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

I can't tell you how many conversations I've had over the years with people outside of church who, when they find out that I'm clergy (which sometimes immediately kills the conversation ☹), make a comment like, "Yeah, I really should get back to church, but there are things in my life I need to fix first" or "I haven't been to church in so long... I'm sure God's not very impressed with me" or "I'm not exactly the kind of person you want at church." At times I would guess you and I may share these same sentiments. And yet it is exactly people like us who should feel welcomed to church because Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, to restore the broken, to give his life in order to bring us back to God.

Our lives may be filled to the brim with our own rituals or ways of trying to get our act together so we can be right with God, but it doesn't work. And when we are in a situation in which we have run out, we don't need rituals, we need the grace of God; we don't need the water of the law, we need the wine of grace.

When I was in kindergarten I was a big fan of Batman and was given a toy Bat-mobile for my birthday. It was so cool. When you turned it on it would automatically go and if it hit something, like a piece of furniture, it would reverse and then go forward again in a new direction. This would continue until one of two things happened: either it was turned off or the battery ran out of power. Until then, it would go, hit something, reverse, and go again in a new direction—over and over and over.

That's often what happens in our lives. We try to move forward until we hit a wall, then we back up, change directions and move forward again until we hit another wall—over and over and over. This happens in careers and in marriages, with besetting sins and addictions, and with New Year's resolutions, on and on and on... But eventually something happens and we get turned off or our internal battery runs out—and we hit a place in our lives where we can no longer move

forward at all. In that place the last thing we need is ritual cleansing or the law. In that place we need the grace of God.

I recently read Gerhard Forde's powerful book, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, a helpful treatment of Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. Listen to how Forde describes how God meets us in that place when we can no longer move forward on our own strength:

“God is not... one who waits to approve those who have improved themselves, made themselves acceptable, or merited approval, but one who bestows good on the bad and needy... the love of God creates precisely out of nothing. Therefore the sinner must be reduced to nothing in order to be saved... Only the ‘friends of the cross’ who have been reduced to nothing are properly prepared to receive the justifying grace poured out by the creative love of God. All other roads are closed” (113-115).

All other roads are closed, but there is one road that is open, there is one way out, Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

Going back now to the miracle of Jesus' changing the water into wine... this miracle was the first of seven *signs*. Signs are significant in and of themselves, but signs also point to something even more significant. Do you remember Jesus' initial reply to his mother when she informed him that the wine had run out? “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

Well, a few years after he changed the water into wine Jesus' hour did come. After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday Jesus told his disciples, “*The hour has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:23) and on the eve of his passion and death on the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, *the hour has come*; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you” (17:1).

A few years after Jesus changed the water into wine Jesus again addressed his mother as “woman”—this time from the cross: “Woman, behold your son” (19:26).

When Jesus changed the water to wine he revealed his glory a little bit. When he died on the cross for the sins of the world, he revealed his glory a lot.

And when Jesus revealed his glory by changing the water into wine, how did his disciples respond? John puts it very simply, “*His disciples believed in him.*” Belief in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world is a major theme in the Gospel According to John. In the first chapter John writes, “to all who received him, who *believed* in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1:12) and near the end of his gospel account he states that the gospel was written “so that you may come to *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through *believing* you may have life in his name” (20:31).

So what about you today?

Perhaps there is an area in your life where you have “run out of wine.” Perhaps you have been turned off or your internal battery is dead and you simply cannot move forward in your own strength anymore.

In the miracle of Jesus’ changing water into wine we see that God meets us in that place where we have run out, that God cares about every detail in our lives and that God changes the water of the law into the wine of grace.

Moreover, this miracle is a sign that points us to the cross, where Jesus died not to change water to wine, but to change despair to hope, sinners to saints, death to life; for if you look back to the first four words of today’s passage you’ll see that this miracle took place “on the third day” (2:1), and of course, Jesus’ death is not the end of the story, for he was raised “on the third day.”

Ant it doesn’t end there, for in heaven we will join the great wedding banquet with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and the Bride of Christ, the church—and there will be plenty of wine.

Perhaps today, like Mary, you realize there is really only One to whom you can turn when you have “run out of wine.”

Perhaps today God wants to fill you to the brim with the wine of His grace.

Perhaps your hour has come to believe in him.

Let us pray.