

180 Gallons of Grace

John 2:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 17, 2016]

I

Ever since the world began, wine has been a favorite beverage for meals...
parties...
celebrations...
and weddings...
especially weddings.

Wine and weddings have gone hand in hand for centuries.

In the ancient world, wine was the beverage of festive celebration.

The Bible describes wine as the oil of gladness,
as a sign of the kingdom of God.

Isaiah looked forward to a time when all God's people will share wine at the great
heavenly banquet.

Paul counseled Timothy to "*take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and
your frequent ailments.*" (1 Timothy 5:23)

Wine helps people feel good...
helps people be happy.

Wine helps people celebrate...
especially at weddings.

Of course, not at Baptist weddings,
and probably not at Methodist weddings.

But certainly at Jewish,
Catholic,
Episcopal, and,

to be sure,
 Presbyterian weddings.

With few exceptions, people all over the world drink wine at weddings.

II

The occasion for today's gospel story is a wedding,
 a Middle Eastern wedding.

Middle Eastern weddings are very different from Western affairs.

In Western weddings the bride is the prominent figure.

When she enters the church,
 arrayed in all her glory,
 the whole congregation rises,
 every eye focused on her as the organ thunders,
"Here comes the bride; fair, fat and wide!"
 or whatever.

But in Middle Eastern weddings,
 it is the groom who is prominent.

He is the featured one;
 the bride merely shows up for the wedding.

She is like how some people view the minister at weddings —
 a sort of necessary evil.

Not only is the groom the featured person,
 he also pays for the whole thing!

(I've already paid for one daughter's wedding,
 so I think that is a very good idea!)

Some of those weddings went on for as long as a week—
 with all the relatives of both sides of the family
 and all the friends and neighbors
 joining together for a big celebration.

John is describing this kind of wedding.

Jewish weddings usually began on Tuesday nights, and the groom and his friends would go over to the bride's house.

On the way over, the groomsmen would be swinging their olive-oil lamps,
having a wonderful time.

The men would gather in front of the bride's home,
and she would come out to the front steps.

Now, for the first time in her adult life, she would take off her veil and show how beautiful she really was.

This removal of the veil was a special event.

Then, the groom and the groomsmen would again walk down the streets with their olive-oil lamps swinging,
and they would go over to the groom's house to begin a seven-day party.

During those seven days, family and friends would bring their gifts of food and wine and their good humor.

They would party for seven days.

At such wedding celebrations as these, wine was served.

Remember that wine is part of the daily lives of Jewish people to this day.

Nowhere is this truer than at a celebration:

a bris...

a bar mitzvah...

and especially a wedding.

Wine and weddings...

the oil of gladness...

a sign of the abundance of God's kingdom.

III

So in today's story, Jesus and his disciples come to the wedding.

Now there are probably still some teetotalers around who have trouble with the idea of Jesus attending a wedding where the wine flowed freely.

And it is probably a big disappointment to fundamentalists who still hold to the old saw that when Jesus went to parties, he only drank grape juice.

Did you know that Welch's grape juice, which the vast majority of Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and evangelical churches use for Communion, was invented by Thomas Bramwell Welch, a Methodist minister, who was trying to find a nonalcoholic alternative to wine?

His son, Charles Welch, promoted the product at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, and said unfermented grape juice was born "out of a passion to serve God by helping his church to give its communion (as) 'the fruit of the vine' instead of the 'cup of devils.'"

What an embarrassment to the Welches and many others that here was Jesus at a real live, wine-imbibing party that was going to last seven days.

Now there are some things in life you just don't do.

You don't leave the house wearing dirty underwear.

You don't insult a 300 pound biker named Tank.

And you don't run out of wine at a Jewish wedding.

Can you hear the bad news beginning to spread...
the tongues wagging...
the gossip?

No wine! What an embarrassment!

This was a Jewish wedding,
not a wake.

You don't run out of wine at a Jewish wedding!

For a wedding to run out of wine was an omen of bad things in the future for the bride and groom.

Maybe they wouldn't be able to have children,
 or maybe their crops would fail,
 or maybe illness would claim one of them.

Running out of wine was not only a huge embarrassment for the groom and his parents, it was also a portent of future misfortune.

What were the groom and his family to do?

They didn't have a carry-out to run to.

They didn't have a Marsh nearby with shelf after shelf of various wines to choose from.

What to do?

IV

Leave it to a woman to solve the problem.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, intervenes.

Why? We don't know for sure.

Some ancient texts suggest that the groom was a cousin of Jesus or one of his younger brothers.

Another possibility is that since Jesus came from Galilee bringing his disciples with him, they were unexpected guests and because of them the wine had run out.

Mary seized the occasion to say, very significantly, to Jesus,
"They have no wine."

She does not ask him to do anything about it;
 she merely tells him,
"They have no wine."

Is she reminding her son that as a guest he should have brought wine?

Does she want Jesus and his followers to take up a collection and buy wine?

Or does she suspect,
 at this early stage,
 that he is capable of some kind of miraculous act?

We cannot know for sure, but we can note that Jesus' response is neither rude nor disrespectful,
 though it may sound that way to us.

When he says, "*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?*"
 he is using a common title of respect—
 the way married woman were addressed at that time.

Later, he will address his mother from the cross in the very same way,
 "*Woman, behold your son!*" (John 19:26, RSV)

The key to understanding is in the phrase,
 "*My hour has not yet come.*"

Jesus' hour is mentioned some 26 times in John's Gospel.

Later it will be revealed that Jesus' hour is the decisive moment of his glorification—
 his death,
 resurrection,
 and ascension.

It is the *kairos* moment when Jesus freely offers up his life for the redemption of the world.

Jesus is living by God's timetable.

He makes clear to his mother that his actions will be governed by the hour set by God, not by anyone else's time or will.

V

But Mary is not so easily dissuaded.

Being a good Jewish mother,
she knows just the right thing to say.

So she simply ignores her son and speaks directly to the servants—
“See this man? Do whatever he tells you. Trust me.”

We can only guess the look on Jesus’ face.

He knows he is on the spot.

Oh, well...maybe this is as good a time as any to get started.

So Jesus says to the servants,

“See those six water jars? Fill them up with water.”

Now, these were big stone jars...
each holding twenty to thirty gallons.

Notice that the jars stand empty, waiting to be filled.

These jars were used for the Jewish rites of purification.

That is, before their worship services,
the Jews would wash their faces,
before prayers they would wash their hands and feet.

Jesus says to the servants,

*“I want these jars filled up to the brim...
not half full,
not three-quarters full,
not seven-eighths full,
not fifteen-sixteenths full...
I want them filled right up to the brim.
I want them fuller than full.”*

So the servants filled those six jars right up to the brim.

It would have taken quite a while to fill that many jars with that much water.

They couldn't just grab the garden hose and have at it.

Water would have to be hauled from the village well,
perhaps some distance away.

When my older daughter served in the Peace Corps in Zambia,
she had to haul water from a kilometer away.

When the servants are finally finished Jesus says,
"I want you take some to the host."

The servants took the wine over to the host.

Can't you see him, like Paul Giamatti in the movie *Sideways*,
taking a cup and sipping it,
then swirling it around,
sniffing the aroma,
drinking it again,
smacking his lips and saying,

"That's Paul Masson, 2016... the best wine I've ever tasted!"

He commends the groom for saving the best wine till now.

We are not told what the groom said.

He must have been bewildered at this strange turn of events.

But he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and to take credit for the whole thing.

But I'll bet he was thinking to himself,
"We will serve no wine before its time!"

And I can picture the host looking at the six jars of wine,
and I can just imagine him saying:

"That is a lot of wine.

*There is enough wine here for a whole city...
for the whole country...*

for the whole world.”

Then comes the key line in the story, verse 11:

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

VI

You know what I think John is doing in this story?

I think he is taking us back to John 1, verses 50 and 51, where Jesus says to Nathaniel,

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.....Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

John wants us to see this promise of “greater things” fulfilled very soon...
in fact, in just three days.

But then John takes us further back in chapter 1, to verses 14 and 16, where he writes:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness (the fullness of six large jars of wine) we have all received grace upon grace.

In the gospel of John, the miracles are always called “signs.”

Commentators refer to the first eleven chapters of John as “the book of signs.”

Think about what signs say to us.

Signs can serve as a warning—
like the stop sign at the corner in front of our church.

Or signs can point us in the right direction—
like an exit sign on I 69.

The sign is always more than just a piece of metal with paint on it.

That is how it is with the signs in the gospel of John—
 they point beyond themselves to the reality of God's grace revealed in
 his Son Jesus.

So what is the message of this first sign of Jesus transforming water into wine?

The message is not so much the miracle of water turned into wine as it is the
 transformation of religious faith that results from Jesus carrying out the Father's
 will.

The Jewish purification rituals came from the law of Moses
 but grace and truth were given through Jesus Christ.

From His fullness, we all have received grace upon grace upon grace.

Jesus took 180 gallons of Jewish laws, the rituals of purification, and transformed
 them.

Jesus took 180 gallons of guilt,
 180 gallons of laws, laws and more laws--
 over 600 laws that were part of Jewish religion at that time—
 and transformed them into a new religion,
 filled with new meaning,
 from new wine that would burst old wine skins.

The changing of the water into wine is a sign of the new and abundant life Jesus
 came to bring.

180 gallons of guilt are transformed into 180 gallons of grace.

There is enough grace here for our church and community,
 for Portland and Muncie and Indianapolis.....
 enough grace for the whole state of Indiana,
 enough grace for the entire world.

From God's fullness of grace,
 right up to the brim,

we all have received grace upon grace upon grace.

VII

In this miracle Jesus works an unprecedented act: the transformation of 180 gallons of plain drinking water into good, rich wine.

It is a miracle of abundance...

of extravagance...

of transformation and new possibilities.

Jesus' ministry begins with an extraordinary act of grace:
a first glimpse of the "greater things" to come.

And we are invited to share in the wonder of this miracle,
to enter into the joyous celebration made possible by Jesus' gift.

He has become, in this story, the new pathway to God—
the one who will later proclaim,

*"I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly" ...
"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*

180 gallons of grace
and 180 gallons of forgiveness
for sins past, present and future.

Do you remember the story of the man who prayed:

"Today Lord, I have not sinned. I have not lost my temper today. I have not cursed today. I have not lusted today. Bless me now as I get up out of bed. Amen."?

There is 180 gallons of grace to cover all the sins that we commit after we get up in the morning.

What happens at the wedding in Cana is the coming out of Jesus as Messiah.

There have been patriarchs and prophets,
sages and wisdom teachers,
and now—the Son.

John tells us that in Jesus, God saves the best for last.

This new faith of Jesus is one of joy and happiness.

Being a Christian is like going to a party.

Being a Christian is like going to a Jewish wedding.

The bridegroom is with us, and through his death and resurrection we have the gift of abundant life.

Christianity is not for sour pussers.

Christianity is not for legalists.

Christianity is not for people who love to wallow in their guilt the way pigs wallow in the mud.

Some religious people are like that.

They are quick to judge others...

to condemn as heretics those who don't confess to the same doctrinal statements that they do...

or confirm to the same standards of belief and practice that they adhere to...

and they seem to enjoy wallowing in the mud of their narrowness, exclusiveness, and guilt.

That is not what the faith of Jesus is about.

The purpose of this new faith is not to leave you feeling grumpy, but to give you joy and lead you to happiness.

This new faith allows us to be fully human in all of our sorrow,
in all of our sinfulness,
in all of our guilt,
in all our stupidity,
in all our bungs.

