

When the Wine Runs Out

John 2:1-11

January 14, 2007

I.

What can we do when the wine runs out? Today's reading contains enough material for several different sermons, and over the centuries preachers probably have used them all.

For me, this story shows how the transformation of water into wine in Cana back then foreshadowed the transforming effect that Jesus can have on our lives at St. Thomas now.

In many ways, as we deal with the problems and realities of the world, our lives can be like the poor wine that was served first. We drink but it does not satisfy us, and we still thirst for something more. Then, in some way or another it can run out.

And here I'm not referring to our eventual deaths, but to the fleeting pleasures and temporary joys we only briefly have when we think we can handle life on our own terms. But these worldly things do not endure, and at sometime or another, in some way or another, the wine runs out, so to speak. And if Jesus is not around, then we are left with an empty glass, wondering how it all got this way.

If Jesus is in the picture, however, he offers us good wine, better than we've ever had, and more than we will ever need. It's the wine that comes from God, and behind all the metaphors we really are talking about the new person we can be in Christ when we invite him into our lives.

II.

Let's look for a moment at setting that John describes in today's reading. Here we have Jesus, shortly after his baptism, at a party with his mother and a some other people who only had become his disciples a few days earlier. This was at the very beginning of his ministry, and this was his first miracle. Here he gave his first sign of who he really is.

And isn't it a unique setting for such a thing to happen? Jesus didn't start off by healing the sick, or making the lame walk, or by restoring the life of a child. No, in the blink of an eye he just brewed up some wine for some people who probably already had too much to drink. Does that sound more like a magician's trick than the revelation of our Lord and Savior?

Thinking of the reading that way reminds me of the story about the priest who was driving and was stopped by a state trooper. The officer asked if the priest had been drinking, and he answered, "no, only water." The trooper then said, "well, why do I smell wine." and the priest, without missing a beat said, "Good Lord! He's done it again!"

Well, a lot of jokes are made about turning water into wine. But a closer examination shows the real meaning of what Jesus did at that wedding in Cana. In this story John gave us a preview of Jesus' ministry and his proclamation of God's kingdom.

This single miracle was all encompassing. It illustrated Jesus' later teachings about being servants and placing others first. It showed how he was able to inspire people to have faith in him. It introduced the idea of being obedient to his will. And it foreshadowed how the results of his ministry, evidenced by the good wine, revealed the promise and blessings of things to come.

III.

The gospel reading tells us that us a party was underway, and that Jesus, his mother, and some of his disciples were there. Mary suddenly informed Jesus that the wine had run out.

Now, in the culture of first century Palestine, a social and cultural disaster was imminent, for at that time the failure to have sufficient wine for one's guests would have been rude and impolite, and could be remembered for years. It was not like there was a variety of beverages from which to choose. There were no soft drinks, and scotch and bourbon were things of the distant future. If the water was not safe to drink, then wine often was the only option.

The story also tells us Jesus was hesitant at first to do anything. He told Mary that it was not their problem, and his hour had not yet come. Jesus knew the timing of his ministry would be set by the Father, not his mother.

But yet Mary turned to the servants and said "do whatever he tells you." And now, it gets interesting, because six empty stone water jars were in the house where the party was underway. Each had a capacity, in modern terms, of twenty to thirty gallons, a total capacity of about one hundred fifty gallons. That's a lot of wine.

Well, for some reason, Jesus then decided to act, for he told the servants to fill the jars to the brim with water. They did so and Jesus immediately transformed it into wine. We do not know how he did this, but it's not important. What's important is that the servants took a sample of the new wine to the chief steward, who found it far superior to the old wine that had been exhausted, and praised the host for saving the best until last.

So, what we basically have here is Act One, Scene One of the drama of Jesus' ministry that would unfold over the next two years. The prophets Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah had written that there would be an abundance of wine in messianic times, and Jesus now fulfilled those old prophecies by creating a new thing in the midst of it.

And it also is important that Jesus' disciples, who had been observers of the scene and had no speaking parts in the story, saw his glory and believed in him. Jesus did not transform the water in the presence of the masses or intend that his actions be widely noticed. His intended audience instead was the disciples, who saw and believed.

IV.

This is where the story of the wedding feast spans the centuries to reach us today because it points beyond Cana to a larger truth of God's kingdom. The story is not only about the spirits into which water was transformed, but also is about anticipation of the Holy Spirit to guide us now as we await the second advent. And if we wait with Jesus at the center of our lives, we can know the abundance of God's grace and the joy of a new life in him.

But this abundance of new and better life we sometimes take for granted. And at other times we find it difficult to even reach out and drink from that cup of grace. Sometimes it seems that the wine just runs out.

It can run out when our lives become filled with pressure and unexpected demands that leave no time for family or ourselves.

It can run out when we learn from our doctor that the results of the test are not encouraging, or that our lifestyle must change because of our health.

The wine can run out when worldly issues divide our families, or financial problems beset us, or when we lose someone dear to us.

Sooner or later, in some way or another, the wine runs out. Our friends drift away. Our jobs and careers, once challenging and rewarding, come to an end.

For many people on the Gulf Coast, the wine dramatically ran out when Hurricane Katrina came ashore.

And what happens in those bone-tired moments when the road to the kingdom seems to have taken a detour; when it seems the sun hides behinds clouds and the birds no longer sing?

In our own lives we want to trust that God's abundance is sufficient. We want to know that in his love for us he provides what we need, and all we must do is just reach out.

But sometimes we ask ourselves if God really has provided. In our hearts we probably know that he has, and if we are honest we acknowledge that it is we who have fallen short. If we feel more distant from God perhaps we should ask ourselves "who moved?"

God is timeless, and our lives today are like that wedding feast in Cana. We celebrate just as those wedding guests celebrated. We have families, friends, and material things just as they did. There often is excitement, the future seems bright, and there is wine to drink.

But without God's promise it quickly fades. Even though we profess our faith we often find that our lives are just the poor wine, inferior in quality, and quickly exhausted.

John's Gospel today tells us of another wine, a fine wine of unsurpassable quality and great abundance. It is the wine of Jesus' glory, which was first made known to the disciples at an ordinary wedding feast, just as it also can be made known to us in the ordinary things we do. In his glory is our salvation, and in our salvation is joy.

And this wine, like all good wine, comes to us with a cost. But the cost is an easy price to pay. We will never exceed our credit limit no matter how many times we run the card through the machine.

Jesus merely asks us to live our lives in a relationship with him and others, free from guilt and false pretenses, committed to the daily struggle of turning away from our own pride and vanity, and giving a proper priority to serving and meeting the needs of others.

V.

The old wine will always run out, but the new wine always is there for us, better than ever and more than we need. If we wish to drink from that cup of the covenant, however, we must do two things.

First, we must remember that this best wine is available from only one guest in the multitudes that move into and out of our lives, and sometimes that precious guest gets lost in the crowd. Jesus knocks, but we must always open the door.

Second, we must remember the words of Mary, who said to the servants "do whatever he tells you." Those words speak to us today. We also are called to do what he tells us, and if we do then through obedience and active faith we can see our lives continually be transformed, just as Jesus transformed the wine in Cana.

It is up to us and the choice is clear. Good wine or poor wine. Wine in limited quantities or more than we will ever need. We can try to drink of the fallen world, or we can drink of the heavenly cup that Jesus offers to us. And if we place our Lord at the center of our lives, we can know the abundance of God's grace and the lasting joy of new life in him. *Amen.*