

Wine and Water

Text: John 2:1-11

Hymn: "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise" (*LSB* 394)

When dying Jacob blessed his son Judah, he told him that one of his descendants, from whom "the scepter would never depart," would "wash his garments in wine, his vesture in the blood of grapes." From then on and for the rest of the Old Testament wine became a symbol of salvation, significant not only as a bringer of joy, not only as a sign of abundance and prosperity, but because, as Jacob prophesied, it would one day get taken up by God to bring about the salvation which it symbolizes.

Eight hundred years before Christ's birth, Isaiah prophesied a day when the LORD of hosts would "swallow up death forever" and "prepare a feast for all peoples of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined," when the "LORD God" would "wipe away tears from all faces, and would take away the reproach of his people from all the earth (Genesis 49:Isaiah 25:6-8)

God promised that one day he would lift the veil of ignorance that covered the nations—the Gentiles—and make them to share with Israel in the feast that God himself would institute, when death and tears are removed forever, when dying and mourning and suffering are taken away. And that would be a feast where God Himself would provide well-aged wine.

And so when we come to the account of Jesus at the wedding in Cana, our ears should be open and sensitive to what is actually going on. John draws attention to many details that might seem there only because that was how it happened. But those details are recorded so we can see more deeply into what Jesus is showing us. For

example, John lets us know that all this happened on the third day, the third day after John the Baptist gave witness to what he saw at Jesus' baptism, which was the moment Jesus publicly took responsibility for our sins. John the Baptist bore witness to that by pointing to Jesus and declaring, "This is the Lamb of God," who by being a lamb of sacrifice takes away sin by dying in the place of others.

And just to be really clear, only a few years after this, Jesus comes to the conclusion of the road he undertook at His baptism. He comes to his death and then there was a third day and something different happened.¹

And so our attention from the beginning is being drawn not only to days of the week and the exact sequence of events and the interval between this event and that, but to what these things tell us, what we should expect to be looking for.

And what we find apart from the catastrophe of wine running out at a wedding—a serious embarrassment for the bridegroom now pegged for the next 20 years with the nickname, "Josiah the Ill-Prepared," or something like that—apart from that, John draws our attention to how Jesus goes about remedying the situation.

When Mary taps him on the shoulder and says, "Jesus, they've run out of wine," (wink, wink, nudge, nudge), Jesus' first response is to distance himself from her. Now if I were to address my mom as "woman," I'd be in big trouble. In 1st century Palestine, however, it would not have sounded so disrespectful. But while addressing his mother "woman" wasn't necessarily rude, it was certainly distant.

"What does this have to do with me?" He goes on to say. And this is definitely adversarial sounding. Legion, the hosts of evil spirits that Jesus once cast out of a man,

¹ And that "something different" included his disciples believing in him (20:8,16,28) and His staying with them for a few days (21:1-23), just as happened after Christ turned water into wine.

said, "What have you to do with us, Son of the Living God?" Same phrase. It carries the sense of, "Are we on the same page? Do we really share a common purpose?" And the implied answer is "no." And yet he springs into action!

Now the reason he's distant from his mother, Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come." Later in the same Gospel, He says, "My hour has come." He says this at the Last Supper, at the end of John's Gospel. On the night he was betrayed, He says, "My hour has come." But his hour had not yet come at the wedding in Cana, which again draws our attention to the fact that this has everything to do with his death.

Mary in all likelihood simply wants Jesus to help a man in need. But Jesus sees this as a pointer to his death. You and I aren't talking about the same thing, Woman. This is not yet the time of my death. This is the third day, time for something else.

But he does spring into action. And to do this he uses jars that are in the house. But these aren't just any old jars. They are jars used for Jewish rites of purification. Six stone water jars, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. (For our Canadian guests this morning, that's between 70 and 100 liters.) Six of them! Out of that water for purification, Jesus provides wine. And this we are told was "the first of his signs," literally, the beginning of his signs whereby "he manifested his glory."

The question for us is, What is the sign pointing to? What are we supposed to draw from these facts? And if your conclusion is that Jesus will never leave you in the lurch, you're not wrong. Or that Jesus can make things that seem plain and ordinary like water into something far richer and greater, such as wine, you're also not wrong. But there is something much deeper here. Jesus takes water for the Jewish rites of

purification and out of that he provides the highest quality of wine. And, as we know, the best wine is that which is well aged.

Jesus came to do away with all other rites of purification. The Old Testament covenant was deeply concerned about purity. God's people were to be holy. But to be holy you had to be clean. If you were unclean, you were unacceptable to God and God could not, would not sanctify you. You were separated from God. Everywhere there are different rites for purification for cases where you had been made unclean. If you had come into contact with death, if you suffered from certain illnesses, if you were guilty of certain sins, they rendered you unclean. They made God unapproachable to you. In fact, they made God dangerous for you. But so that God would not be dangerous or distant, so we could have access to God's grace, rites of purification were established, so that people might be confident that when come into God's presence, they had nothing to fear and they could expect mercy and goodness instead of anger and punishment.

But we all know that if you have been rendered unclean, for example, by death, there is nothing that a little bit of water will actually do about that. That water doesn't actually have any power. You might say it was an indulgence on God's part to allow people to be purified by such weak instruments. But they were more than an indulgence. They pointed to the fact that purity is required. They pointed to the fact that purity is given by the means God has established. Above all, they pointed to the fact that something greater than this was required if genuine and true purity were to be accomplished.

In the same way, all the sacrifices and the rituals of the Old Testament pointed to God's grace and His mercy, to confidence in God's promises, but also to their own incompleteness. Every sacrifice cried out, "The blood of bulls and goats cannot save us." We need something more, something more permanent.

And so Jesus came. He was baptized into death. And so he died. And on the third day he put away death. He abolished death. He wiped away the tears of those who mourned for his death, permanently and forever, victor over the power of death.

And he did not do this for himself. He did not enter into death for himself. And so also his resurrection was not for himself. But it was for us, who are unclean, impure on account of our sins. We are displeasing to God in ourselves and in our lives. We need something stronger than mere water to deal with it.

And so Jesus brought about a purification once for all. Paul writes about this when he speaks of a different wedding in his letter to the Ephesians. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word so that he might present the church to himself with splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

Jesus brings water, which he himself has invested with His power, with the power of His life and work, the power of His death and His resurrection. All of that in a water of purification that cleanses us not just for the next twenty-four hours or until we fall again but once for all. So that sin not only is removed but can no longer attach itself to us, we have a permanent fount of purity in the water of baptism. As Jesus says later in John's Gospel, for those who believe in him wells of living water will spring out from them, from

you! It's no longer water that comes from the outside to cleanse you, but he enters into you, takes away your impurity, takes away your sin, takes away the reproach, takes away the power of death and then he comes and flows out from you.

And having been purified by a water that is not mere water but water joined with God's command and His word, we now become pleasing to God and we too are invited to feast with Jesus. He provides the wine. And the wine is none other than His blood. This is why there is so much talk of wine in the Old Testament. It's not mere metaphor. Jesus takes wine and invests that with the greatest gift ever given on earth—the blood that He shed as a gift for us that we might be cleansed by the power of His blood and we might be brought to new life in union with that blood, His lifeblood. It's brought to us under the wine of the Lord's Supper, in the cup, in your mouth.

For two thousand years, that wine has been flowing ceaselessly into the life of the church. Talk about well-aged! And if there are another 2,000 years, it will still not run out or lose its power. Jesus replaces all rites of purification, whether made by man or given by God under a previous covenant, with something that has greater sweetness and greater potency to an infinite degree. You have been cleansed. The water of life has been planted inside you. You have been made a well of living water so that the life you now live you live by Christ who lives in you. And your whole life now has become a source of life for the world. As St. Paul says, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." For all this and his infinite mercy, thanks be to God!

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church