



## Water to Wine

John 2:1-11

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The marriage at Cana is important to us for a lot of reasons. You have to remember how critical marriage was to a woman of this time. It's no exaggeration to say that as an adult, you weren't even a person if you weren't attached to a man: no rights, no legal standing, nothing. A wedding was a huge celebration not just of a new creation – a new family, the potential for children and immortality through descendants – but of the bride's rescue from being a non-person, a pair of hands and a mouth to feed, a burden on her family. It sounds awful now, but in Jesus' day, like coming out of a bad car wreck with nothing worse than a totaled car, it sure beat the alternative.

Jesus shows up at this wedding shortly after his baptism, according to John; and not just him, but his mother and a bunch of his friends. One thing is clear, even before the miracle: Jesus likes to have fun. There's nothing at all wrong with celebration as far as he's concerned. The good gifts of God should make us happy!

And, you've got to agree, that's one serious celebration that can dispose of well over a hundred gallons of wine!

But it isn't just any wine, is it? It's great wine, better than the good stuff they'd started the feast with, it's wine that makes a person used to good wine say, "you've saved the best for last!"

So how do we know what is the best? How do we know that what we have is even valuable?

My brother is sixteen years older than me, and is a very meticulous, organized, neat and clean guy; that's why he went into science, geology, and I didn't. He built models, really beautiful models of aircraft. He made a magnificent wood replica of a B-17 bomber which hung from the ceiling in his old bedroom; it's the clearest memory I have of that room. That plane – along with his other models – made great toys, once I was

able to get at them. But they were much better works of art. A six-year-old has no clue about that sort of beauty or value, which is why those models didn't survive *my* childhood. We learn value and worth through experience.

One reason we can't tell the good from the ordinary is that we don't know enough, as I didn't. Another is lack of interest: a Picasso may be a magnificent example of art, technique, and vision, but if you don't like it, it's just colors on canvas. We can also be so distracted by hype, by noise, by shiny appearances that we don't see what's underneath: it doesn't take much silver to plate a piece of brass, but that doesn't change the fact that it's still not pure silver. Sometimes we mistake what feels or looks or tastes good for true good – if we like it, it must be good, every nutritionist's nightmare!

But there are other reasons, too. At the wedding in Cana, the wine steward put his finger on it: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have had enough to drink that they can't tell anymore, slip in the cheap stuff." Like the guest who've been there for a while, our ability to tell what's good has been impaired; we get so wrapped up in the intoxicating richness of life, in the standards and ways of the world, that we lose the ability to tell what's good and what's not.

Now, clearly the wine steward was clear-eyed enough to tell the difference. Are we? We certainly have the experience to know what's good and what's not, and if we ever had a question, well, there are others around us who might be able to help.

We get impaired by life, sometimes. So wrapped up in what's going on, so loaded with conflicting information and emotion, so dragged around by the millions of stimuli that scream at us, that we have a very hard time seeing the good for what it is.

And then there's the most critical part of this: let's say that you've been able to do what I'm talking about, cut through the mess of modern life, and been able to separate – discriminate – what's ordinary from what's truly exceptional. Bravo! There remains one issue: recognizing the source.

The wine steward at the wedding in Cana knows good wine when he tastes it, no question. More than that, he knows that something special's happening: the bridegroom, the host of the party, is being exceptionally generous, even gracious – extravagantly, amazingly, prodigally so. What a waste of great wine! No one will be able to appreciate it! But what the steward doesn't know that it isn't really the host who's responsible for this amazing gift, it's Jesus. John says right out that the steward has no idea.

Most of the time, most of us are like that wine steward. We've been around the block, we can tell fresh fish from old, certainly a fresh orange from our back yard from one shipped halfway around the world. We can recognize and rejoice in the good that happens to and around us every day.

But do we know where that good comes from? Do we really? It comes from God, of course. And that illustrates the great truth: everything's better when we recognize that it comes from God. Sure, all of creation is God's; everything has God's maker's mark on it – but what comes our way has been specially crafted for you and me.

To see that, to really know that, means paying attention, looking past the glitter and sparkle of what looks good on the surface. It means seeing God's work in each and every day, which is given to us fresh and new; we need to disengage ourselves from all that tries to get us to settle for less. To stop settling for appearance rather than substance, what tastes good rather than what is good.

The good news is that like that wine at the wedding, what God gives us now, today, is the best: God has saved the best for now, for each of us. Now.

But...and it's a big but. What about the fact that our bodies and sometimes our minds just wear out? What about all the obviously bad things that happen? What about the suffering we see in our sisters and brothers down in Haiti every time we turn on the TV?

God is there, too. You've probably watched with me reporters, almost amazed, telling of crowds singing hymns, praising God, praying out loud in the streets and villages, while all around them lies destruction and death.

There are times when the strength and wisdom of people who have little or nothing shames those of us who have more than everything material. What we see, no matter how sharp our vision, is not the whole of reality. Look at the glittering diamond on a hand near you. It didn't always look like that; once it was, to our eyes, just a very ordinary rock. It took the right knowledge, experience, and sight to pick that rock out of all the others around it; it took skill and artistry to take that rock, break it apart, and create that tiny piece of light and beauty. But it started as a plain-looking rock, something you might throw.

A good book, or movie, or play has lots of twists and turns and false leads, that in the end resolve themselves. If we knew how everything was going to turn out, then the story wouldn't be interesting, exciting, or even hold our attention. It's the movement, the journey, that gives the destination its character, its meaning; how many times have you left a movie talking about some scene that fit so perfectly into the ending, but which you barely noticed as it took place? We are living God's story, and the people of Haiti living it alongside us, each for the other. We don't know the details of the end, or the plot twists; although God is in charge, we still must help our fellow human beings, because that's a part of God's call to us.

The passage we heard from Isaiah 63 talks about God giving Israel a new name, a name that shows his love and care and responsibility for his people. In fact, God marries them, changes their name. God has a name for each of us; but we also have the power to name. We can name what we see and what we live as God's, we can realize that we live in God's reality, God's Kingdom.

And then, we too can experience the incredible, extravagant, gracious goodness of Jesus Christ – the same one who made that party in Cana one to remember is still taking perfectly good water and making it the best wine, in you and in me. There, it was joy in celebration, an abundance of the best wine; here, now, in your life and mine, life more abundant, poured out and multiplied in relation to others.

A friend of mine has an enormous family, twelve kids, and many of them have their own children as well, which means that Christmas feels more like an airport terminal than an intimate event. But they're well enough off to be able to have really splendid spreads of gifts, and huge celebrations of meals. One year, once the dinner had got well under way, she realized one of her granddaughters was missing, so went off searching for her. She found her sitting in a pile of wrapping paper, crying to herself.

"What's wrong?" "I didn't get what I wanted for Christmas." Stifling a groan, my friend asked: "What did you want?"

"I don't know...but I didn't get it."

God has what we want; God's giving us what we need. It's just that we don't always see what we have for what it is: the best our loving God has to offer. We're sitting, surrounded by piles of glorious gifts, piles of beautiful wrapping, but we don't even know for sure what it is we want, and our hearts are restless until they get a glimpse of what that might be, and name it for ourselves.

The key to unlocking God's place in your life, just like healthy living, is making what you need, what you want: we need the good God offers, the good gifts that surround us even now. All we have to do is learn to want it, and watch the water of life turn into wine, the very best wine, abundantly and extravagantly poured out for us.