

Second Sunday After Epiphany “When This World Is Not All Wine and Weddings” John 2:2-4

The popularity of wine and wineries has exploded in the last two decades, but, biblically speaking, wine is nothing new. There are 237 uses of “wine” in the English Standard Version of the Bible. Some are in compounds like wineskin or winepress. Of course, there are many warnings about drinking too much wine and becoming stupid. Some Old Testament passages and the book of Revelation use wine as a symbol of God’s wrath poured out upon this rebellious and sinful world.

But not all biblical references to wine are negative. In the Old Testament wine appears along with grain and oil as blessings of God upon His people Israel. Then, a portion of those blessings, including wine, is to be returned to God as a thank offering for His goodness to them. There also are passages which show wine as a gift of God that has a proper place and a positive purpose in the life of God’s people. For example, in Psalm 104 God causes plants to grow so that we can have food and “wine to gladden the heart of man.” Ecclesiastes 10:19 tells us that bread is made for laughter and that wine gladdens life.

Don’t worry, this message is not a commercial for wine drinking sponsored by the Illinois Winery Association. All of this brings us to the joyful setting of our text: a wedding. There are only 19 uses of the word “wedding” in the Bible. All but two of them are in the Gospels where they refer mostly to what we would call a wedding reception. For years my view of wedding receptions was that of pastor whose main purpose in being there was to have the meal prayer. But more recently we have had the “privilege” of paying for two of these parties for our daughters. I learned that there are three main elements to a wedding reception: food, drink and music. And those three things had better be good, or at least plentiful, or your invited guests, family and friends, will leave disappointed.

Our text is early in John's Gospel and Jesus' ministry. He attends wedding in Cana, a village just a few miles from His home town of Nazareth. Since His mother, Mary, is there also, this is very likely family event. Jesus possibly is related, humanly speaking, to either the bride or the groom. More than just one day, a wedding reception in that culture lasted a week. And there were not just a few guests invited to it, but the whole town came. It was a logistics headache and a planning nightmare. The person in charge of this particular party misjudged the amount of supplies needed and had not ordered enough wine. Now they have run out. This is worse than not having enough baked beans at the Youth BBQ. This is not just the social faux pas of season. It will be the talk of the town for years, even decades, to come. "That Smith family on Main Street is the one that ran out of wine at their daughter's wedding way back in aught 8."

Mary comes to Jesus with both their need and her concern. And in way only mother can do, she lets Jesus know that He should act and do something about this. Jesus, for His part, responds with both the independence and obedience of a grown son, "Why does that involve us?" This is not the time or the place or the reason for Jesus to display His divine power and glory. The eternal Son of God has come into this world for our forgiveness, new life and eternal salvation. His mission on earth does not include making wine appear for a party to continue. But Jesus dutifully does what His mother asks of Him.

Yet notice how Jesus does so. This is so important for our understanding of how He works in our lives. Jesus does not make a big show of it. He does not stand up, get everyone's attention by clinking His glass and then say, "Look everybody, your water now will turn into wine, whoo hoo!" No, instead, He tells the servants to fill jars with water and then take that water to the wedding coordinator. What he drinks is wine and it is the really good stuff. Jesus is not even in the room at that point. He is not there to say, "That was me, I did that." No, by then He has slipped off anonymously into the crowd.

Behind the scenes, not wanting any credit, Jesus performs this miracle. To be sure, this is not on the same level as saving the world, but it is sparing a family from community shame. The party at that one wedding lasts little longer. It is our nature to want this life to be a never-ending party full of fun and games. We do not want to be stuck with the mundane and boring aspects of daily life: doing laundry, washing dishes, shoveling snow, buying groceries, figuring and paying taxes. Instead, we want a life completely freed from chores and obligations and full only of excitement, entertainment and fun, fun, fun! For example, such thinking influences our ways of worship and our choice of churches. But the reality of this life is quite otherwise.

There are boring and dull chores that must be done for this life to continue. That helps prepare us for when life is the complete opposite of fun and games. Bad things happen to us in this sinful world. A job is lost. Our health is threatened. The marriage ends. Grief is experienced. At those times we look into the mirror and say about our life, “There is no more wine.” Faith fades, hope fails, and joy disappears. What are we to do then? Give up? Let this sinful world win? Surrender to the enemies crouching at the door, death and the devil?

No, we do what Mary does in our text. We turn to Jesus and place our problem into His loving, powerful and gracious hands. Jesus will take care of our needs in the way He knows is best for us. But don’t expect a dramatic display of divine power. Jesus works low-key solutions with behind-the-scenes fixes. He improves our lives in ways that we do not realize at the time. Looking back, like with the famous Footprints poem, we see that He was not only with us, but that He carried us through our pain and problem. What we have lost, Jesus replaces with gain. His healing follows our pain. He makes a beginning out of our ending. Finally, Jesus gives us life where this world sees only death.

Jesus is very consistent with this in His earthly ministry. He does not act in the way that our sinful nature expects Him to act. He never performs a big, showy production in order to get amazed attention from people. His ministry is one of simply teaching God's Word, doing loving acts of healing for those who are diseased or disabled, and showing mercy to life's poor and lowly.

As Jesus' ministry began, so does it end. He fixes our problem of sin and death in a way we never would have thought of, by suffering and dying Himself in our place upon cross, executed at the hands of the very Roman government people wanted Him to defeat. But Jesus does not win the war we need winning by leading an army, fighting a battle, defeating an enemy, and then having a parade. Jesus sheds His blood, breathes His last, gives up His Spirit and dies as if He were a criminal. And there Mary stands at foot of His cross. Once again she wants to say, "They have no more wine, Jesus, fix it," but how can she say it to a limp body being buried in a stone tomb?

However, what looks to us to be a defeat is how Jesus, behind the scenes and low-key once again, wins His victory for us. His full tomb becomes an empty grave. His death is reversed by His resurrection. And Holy Spirit given faith drinks this all in and says, "Now this is the good wine!"

There is one more biblical use of the word "wine." It is as an image of God's grace and eternal blessings to us. Isaiah 55 invites us to "buy wine and milk without money and without price." Isaiah 25 tells us that "on the mountain of the Lord there will be a feast of aged wine." Joel 3 promises God's people a life with the Lord where "in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine." For when Jesus is powerfully present with His people in victory over sin, death and the devil, we do get to live a life of wine and weddings. Amen