

Stop Whining, and Savor the Wine!

[Text - John 2:1-11]

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When we think about the life and ministry of Jesus - when we consider all of the signs and miracles attributed to him, changing water into wine may seem a bit strange and superfluous. It's not like healing the sick, opening blind eyes, or providing food for a crowd of hungry people. Yet the author of *John* places this story as the first and foremost *sign* pointing to who Jesus is, and what Jesus is all about.

"There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...and Jesus was invited to the wedding." In First-Century Israel, a wedding feast really was a *feast*, lasting up to seven days, with all kinds of food and drink, music and dancing, frivolity and celebration. "And Jesus was invited to the wedding!" Right off the bat, John is telling us that Jesus is *not* a Party-Pooper! He's not some pouting, pious wet-blanket, who goes around making sure that nobody has any fun! In fact, he often does just the opposite, which is why he is frequently criticized by the religious authorities for enjoying Life far too fully. They call him "a glutton and a drunkard...a friend of sinners and tax collectors" [which they obviously think is a bad thing, but which Jesus sees as a positive quality and an important characteristic].

Unfortunately, there are still many people today who seem to think that in order to be a follower of Christ, or to be a religious leader, you must be an intensely serious and stern individual. After all, the business of the Church is a *serious* business, therefore we better be serious - especially those of us with the title "the Reverend", or "the Very Reverend", or "The Very Very Reverend!" Sadly, that kind of uptight, somber attitude can turn God's *chosen* people into God's *frozen* people - cold, rigid, unbending - worried that any semblance of pleasure or enjoyment might somehow break the sacred spell.

Now of course, the business of the church *is* a serious business - it is the vitally important mission of touching and transforming people's lives with the *Gospel* - the Good News of Jesus Christ. Yet it can't be accomplished by critically picking-at people; it is achieved by compassionately picking-up people, raising their hopes and lifting their spirits. And when we look at the life of Jesus, we see him doing precisely that. He helps people move from bondage to freedom, from doubt to faith, from debilitating fear to liberating love. By telling and showing people the amazing, unconditional love of the Holy One, Jesus transforms a group of ordinary individuals, into an extraordinary community of love and grace. And by seeing religious and social "outcasts" in a completely different light - as beloved children of our One Divine Source - Jesus helps them to see themselves in that exact same light - as valued and welcomed members of the Family of Faith.

From the very start of his ministry, with this very first sign, Jesus shows himself to be a person full of joy and vitality and gracious compassion. Even though it's not his problem, he's willing to save the day for that wedding party - thereby signaling his willingness to save the day for countless others in much more desperate need. Upon Jesus' instruction, six empty stone jars are filled to the brim with water. Normally they would be filled with water to be set-aside for the numerous Jewish rituals of purification. And when we do the math, we realize that six jars, each holding 20 to 30 gallons, would be about 150 gallons of water. That's a lot of water *and* a lot of ritual washing! But that was the religious tradition and Law back then - that every single pot and pan, knife and spoon, face and finger - beyond being hygienically clean - needed to receive a ritualized cleansing in order to be acceptable to the Holy One.

So what does Jesus do? He transforms that 150 gallons of water into deliciously exquisite wine, in order to bring joy and pleasure to the people gathered there. For John, this is the first and fundamental sign which Jesus performs, revealing who he is and what he is all about. Jesus has come, not simply to turn water into wine, but to transform dreary, watered-down lives into lives that are deeply rich and colorful and bursting with flavor! Of course, for many religious leaders, this kind of positive, up-beat attitude just isn't right. So they continuously *whine* and complain that Jesus spends too much time celebrating Life, and not enough time condemning lifestyles. Jesus' warm and close association with fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other social outcasts, makes him an easy target for the gloomy religious critics of his day. Yet Jesus sees this judgmental criticism for what it really is: a fear-filled and jealous protecting of the religious status quo.

A heavy burden for many people in Jesus' day, and still a burden for many today, is an oppressive religious structure that pushes people down, and keeps God somewhere "up there" - as a distant and severe judge who is just waiting for you to make a mistake. And as most of us know, it's extremely difficult to live fully and joyfully, if we're preoccupied with the fear of doing something wrong. Therefore, Jesus invites us all to see and experience the Holy One in a wholly different way - as One who freely gives us this wonderful gift of Life and then asks only, that we share it with one another - fairly, fully, and joyfully!

So today, as you and I share together in the bountiful blessing of Bread and Cup, we remember the One who freely and joyfully gave us his all, and gave us his best; inspiring us to give our all, and our best, in loving service to others. For while you and I may not know the trick of changing water into wine, we do know that opening our hearts to others with a warm and compassionate welcome can actually change the way those people feel about themselves, and about their relationship with God. And that may be the greatest miracle of all!