

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church  
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **When Water Becomes Wine**

John 2:1-11

Sometimes stories say much more than they seem. This story of the marriage at Cana is a good example. From start to finish you have this sense that something's going on underneath the words. But what? The fact that it begins, "On the third day," only adds to the mystery. What do you think of when you hear the words, "On the third day?" Me? I hear echoes of the crucifixion and resurrection. "On the third day he rose from the dead." But what have those words to do with a marriage at Cana? Why would John's gospel begin and end with stories of something that happened on the third day? That all suggests more than just a day in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Read On. It doesn't get any easier or less mysterious. "When the wine gave out," the story notes as a simple matter of fact, as if the wine gives out at every wedding. "When the wine gave out," it says, much as you or I might say, "When the sun went down," or "When the rain stopped." It's something completely normal, not at all unexpected. Yet, no one expects the wine to run out at a wedding. How many weddings have you been to where they ran out of wine? On the other hand, we all know of marriages where the wine gave out. That's certainly not something people expect on their wedding day. Divorced people often say that the love they once had for each other simply isn't there any more. Another way of saying that is simply: they have no more wine. So when you think of it that way the wine giving out isn't uncommon, but it is certainly unexpected. When the wine gave out, John says, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine."

Jesus replied, Woman, what's that got to do with you and me? My hour has not yet come" It's a surprising interchange you'll agree—not the kind of talk we'd imagine between our Lord and his mother. On the other hand it seems to be the norm in those days, not at all a sign of disrespect. So we probably shouldn't read too much into it. It probably just meant he didn't consider it any of his business. Yet, when you take into account the huge amount of wine he made—120 to 180 gallons!—well the whole story becomes larger than life. Here we go again. We have an entirely believable story; yet it's thoroughly unbelievable at the same time. We're in a kind of limbo as we listen, confronted with the ordinariness of life and the hidden surprise of God's intervention. We look into the face of mystery and hope, and we sense the power of love. All this in only the first of the signs Jesus did. Makes you wonder what John's trying to tell us.

The trouble is, John never really comes out and tells us anything, not in a straight-forward manner anyway. All we ever get in John's gospel are stories that spiral around into other stories. We might wish John would teach us plainly how to be born again or where to find the water of life. But no! John prefers just to drop hints. One mysterious sign leads to another and to another. He speaks of being born again as a gift from above. According to John we have about as much to do with being born again as we had with being born in the first place. That midnight conversation with Nicodemus is followed by a story about water, a story that trickles and swirls until Jesus speaks of himself as living water gushing up to eternal life. Then a story about ordinary bread rises and falls and twists and turns, finally ending with Jesus being called the bread of life. The Gospel of John is full of strange talk and mystery, all wrapped up in ordinary events of everyday living. Straight-forward? Hardly! Every story in John's gospel is filled with hints of mysterious power and grace.

Yet the stories are all so ordinary! Everything comes wrapped in a plain wrapper. Here at the beginning of the gospel we find Jesus at a wedding. Nothing extraordinary about that! Later we see him sitting at a well. Nothing extraordinary there either. What he does, what he says all sounds so ordinary. There's no magic wand, no explosion of power, no splashy special effects. The servants filled the jars with water. No lightning flash. They gave the steward a taste of the water now become wine. No magic words. Not even a prayer! "Nothing is changed but everything is changed. What had been water is wine. Word has become flesh. An hour that has not yet come is here. . . What will be is. What seems to be is no more. In this Word and Light of God who is a man, all is new." And yet everything continues in an extraordinarily ordinary way.

In the Air Force we used to say flying was hours and hours of boredom interrupted by moments of stark terror. Isn't that also true of life? Often life for us is days and weeks of ordinary events interrupted by moments of fear and mystery and grace. Life's rarely straight-forward and one-dimensional. Certainly the people with whom we live and move and have our being are complex individuals. Everyone we know comes wrapped in multiple layers of pain and joy and sorrow and hope. Part of the wonder of relationships is learning who the other is. But that learning doesn't come in rapid fashion. It comes over time—days, weeks, months, and years. Gradually layers of meaning unfold, we learn the stories that make up identity and we grow together in friendship and in love. It's all so ... ordinary.

Also ordinary are moments when the wine gives out. Each of us has experienced times like that. We've felt the sweetness of friendship go sour. Who hasn't noticed that the excitement of new beginnings has silently slipped away into the dullness of *deja-vu* all over again. And in church? One preacher asks, "When was the last time you staggered out of a church, drunk with the true wine of worship—your whole being in ferment under the impact of God's presence and word of judgment, of mercy, and of challenge?"<sup>1</sup> Did we not have a sense of great excitement when we joined the church? Weren't we filled with the wine of idealism and hope? What has become of our hopes, our dreams? Is it possible that we, too, have run out of wine?

What do you do when the wine runs out? To whom do we turn when "We have no more wine." Jesus' mother tells us simply: Do whatever he tells you. That seems to be the essence of discipleship. Doing whatever he tells us. Obedience to Jesus lies at the heart of the gospel. Those who call for personal involvement in mission may have a point: the heart of faith is doing whatever Christ tells us to do. Dietrich Bonhoeffer linked belief and action together saying simply: "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."<sup>2</sup>

Obedience to Christ, doesn't require complete understanding. The servants had no clue to what Christ was up to. They merely obeyed his instructions. Obedience to Christ, rarely comes with certitude. When they took the drink to the steward they weren't certain it was anything but water. Obedience to Christ in some way comes before belief. At the beginning of the gospel nobody believes in Jesus. Only after obedience, only after the water became wine does John say anything about faith. "Now this the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee," John says; "and his disciples believed in him." Obedience to Christ is a key to faith.

We all know what he told them to do. And we know what happened when they did it. In our scientific skeptical worldview, we just don't know what to make of it. Further, we know that Jesus won't rescue us if we don't order enough wine. Faith isn't a cover for poor planning and foolish living. So we'd better not teach that Jesus will bail us out whenever we get in a jam. Any student knows that prayer's no substitute

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<sup>1</sup> J. Barrie Shepherd, *Of Water and Wine*, as printed in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, volume 1, Number 1, September/October 1986 (Nashville: The Upper Room)

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 54.

for preparation. On the other hand, Jesus clearly has the power to bring new life, to turn stale water into sparkling wine. If we turn to him, if we listen, if we obey, we may be amazed at the transformation that comes about. Obeying even the simplest command we may begin to sense that something marvelous has taken place within us. Indeed, we may begin to experience the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. Our values, our goals, our whole life may change. We may find that what we used to think was good wine, isn't. When that happens we'll know the meaning of the wine steward's words: the good wine has been saved for last.

For those in Christ, John's gospel seems to say, the best is always yet to come. For those in Christ, there's something extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. Here's to your future, believers! Drink deep and taste the joy of water become wine.