

## **“The Miracle We Can Taste”**

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1-28-18

Based upon Amos 9, 11, 13-15; John 2:1-11

Have you heard the joke about the teetotaling minister? As part of his sermon one day he cried out with passion and authority: “If I had all the beer in the world, I’d take it and throw it in the river; and if I had all the wine in the world, I take it and throw it in the river! And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I’d take it and throw it into the river!” After he sat down, the choir leader then stood up and said with a grin, “Please rise and join me in singing our next hymn, number 258: ‘Shall We Gather at the River?’”<sup>1</sup> But seriously... as the joke illustrates, in religious circles especially, alcohol tends to be perceived in one of two ways: as a sinful and dangerous temptation to be avoided at all cost, or as one of the pleasures of life to be enjoyed, albeit in moderation. Both views were evident to me this week in the way that the commentaries dealt with today’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus turns six jars of water into gallons of fine wine for a wedding feast. Those who like the lesson point to the fact that it was John’s way of demonstrating that Jesus had the power to work great miracles, and that he did so to demonstrate God’s abundance. Those who don’t like the lesson point to the fact that Jesus was rude to his mother, wasted his power on something utterly frivolous like wine-making, (when he should have been helping the poor), all to make a point that doesn’t even seem true today: that the Lord will provide us with abundance if we only ask. Now I don’t know if the first scholars are all wine lovers, and the others are teetotalers, but regardless, these disparate takes on the text leave us with a choice in how to interpret the text and apply it to our own lives. Should we focus on the miracle and downplay the fact that it was wine, given what we now know about the dangers of alcoholism? Should we focus on the miracle but downplay the abundance of it because of the truth of lasting poverty? Or should we use this story as justification for gathering at the river, so to speak?

After studying this text in depth, I believe the answer is none of the above. We cannot ignore the fact that this story is about wine, because as I’ll explain in a minute, the fact that Jesus made wine and not lemonade or some other drink is hugely significant symbolically. We cannot downplay the abundance on the grounds that not everyone has material abundance in this world either, to do so would be to misunderstand what God’s abundance is, and we should not use this passage to justify over-indulgence “at the river.” This passage is not advocating drunkenness or encouraging alcoholism. It is advocating Jesus as the Messiah, and inviting all of us to taste the miracle of his abundant grace.

John gives us evidence of this from the very beginning of the text. Although the video we saw begins “On the second day of the week” for some reason, the Scripture lesson actually says: “On the *third* day there was a wedding in Cana.” “The third day” is a loaded phrase for Christians today, and was in John’s time as well because Jesus was raised on the third day after his crucifixion. So before we even get to the wine, John has given us a clue that the story is not

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<sup>1</sup> Ohr Somayach International, “*Favorite Jewish Wine*,” Ask the Rabbi blog, retrieved Jan. 23, 2018 from [https://ohr.edu/ask\\_main.php/243/Q5](https://ohr.edu/ask_main.php/243/Q5)

really going to be about a beverage crisis at a local wedding. This is a story which foreshadows what will happen on the third day that we are more familiar with; it is a story about the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

But at the point in the Gospel that this story appears, Jesus isn't hanging from a cross or appearing outside a tomb. He has just begun his ministry, and is at a wedding party with his mother, his disciples, and other friends. According to Jewish custom in his day, weddings were not half-an-hour-long ceremonies followed by a reception. Typically, they were seven-day-long affairs, with betrothals, assorted rituals, meals, and more. Think about that if you're planning a wedding, or thinking about paying for your children's weddings some day! We don't know Jesus' relationship to the happy couple; perhaps they were friends of his, or perhaps they were his mother's friends' children. I tend to think the latter because it is Mary who kicks off this miracle by mentioning to Jesus that the hosts have run out of wine. Not only is this a total disaster for the hosts because of the hospitality norms of the day, it was also a disaster for the newlyweds, because in a Jewish wedding, one of the blessings that is said during the ceremony is a blessing over the wine, which symbolizes the couple's joy. So in addition to the hosts being publicly humiliated by not being able to provide for the needs of their guests, the lack of wine would have also potentially reflected badly on the marriage as well. "They did not have enough joy in their marriage to last seven days!" people might have whispered. "This is a bad sign. Such a shame. Their parents are such good people."

Mary was unwilling to let this happen. So she presented the problem to Jesus, who I am sorry to say responded, according to John at least, like a rude adolescent. "Listen lady, that's not my problem. My hour has yet not come." You can almost hear his eye roll. No one knows why Jesus spoke to Mary this way. Maybe for the last 30 years she had been waiting for him to do something holy and divine, and had prodded him to do something so many times that Jesus was fed up. (But who could blame her after the conception and birth she experienced?) Maybe Jesus was an introvert; (we know he liked to go off by himself all the time because of the crowds). So he was secretly happy that the party would have to finish early. Maybe he and his friends were having a fine old time, which he didn't want to interrupt with "work." We don't know. But it seems unlikely that by including this exchange, John was trying to present a systematic theology lesson that our God is a reluctant God who requires human prodding to respond graciously. It's more likely that John was just illustrating that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

In any case, whatever motivated Jesus to be less than gracious, he clearly cared about what his mother said and did because the next thing we know she is saying, "Do whatever he says," and he is working a miracle. Personally, as a mother, I suspect she just gave him the look that all mothers know how to give when their children give them a sassy remark instead of doing what was asked. After that, Jesus got on his feet and told the servants to fill with water the six jars used for ritual purification before religious ceremonies.

We know what happened next. The water became the best wine anyone at the party had ever had. But what matters more than the quality of the wine from our understanding of the text, is the quantity Jesus made: about 180 gallons of wine, or roughly the equivalent of 454

bottles of average size in our day. That is far more than enough wine to avert a social crisis and bless a marriage. It is a crazy huge amount of wine for one party, which we can only assume had been already going for quite some time when the regular wine ran out. Now maybe Jesus made this much wine just to get his mother off his back. But it's more likely that he made this much to demonstrate the abundance of God. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus says a few chapters later in *John*, after he had not only made too much wine, he had also made a few fish and loaves of bread become so much food that there were twelve full baskets of leftovers. The miracle at Cana was an object lesson; it was a preview of the extravagant, immoderate abundance of God's grace in Christ. The wedding was awash in wine, thanks to the grace of God.

For the religious folks who were there, this would have signified far more than the fact that Jesus could do amazing party tricks. Symbolically speaking, in the Hebrew Scriptures, wine and God go hand in hand. The first sign God gave the escaped Hebrew slaves when they sent spies into the wilderness was grapes so big two men had to carry them (*Num.* 13:23). The Passover liturgy includes four ceremonial glasses of wine, each celebrating different freedoms given by God.<sup>2</sup> The sacrificial laws of the day required pouring wine over every sacrifice. (See e.g. *Num.* 28:14-15). Israel itself was referred to as God's vineyard (*Is.* 5:1-7). Long before the wedding in Cana, wine was a symbol of God's abundant grace, which is why a number of the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament are dripping with wine. As we heard from *Amos* a few minutes ago, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord... when the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it... I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel... And they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine..." (*Amos* 9:11). *Isaiah* and *Joel* have similar prophecies (*Is.* 25:6; *Joel* 3:18), and one of the apocryphal texts which is in Catholic Bibles but not Protestant ones, *Second Baruch*, adds that when the Messiah appears, "On one branch will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine." (*2 Bar.* 29:5). A "cor" was about 120 gallons. So you see, the sign that John was talking about when he said that this was the first of Jesus' signs, was not simply that he had the power to work miracles; it was that Jesus was the promised Messiah. His time had not yet come in the sense that he was ready to reveal his messianic identity through his crucifixion and resurrection. But with his wine-making miracle, Jesus foreshadowed that the messianic age had begun, and that through him humanity would be showered with God's abundant grace.

Notice I said abundant grace, however, not abundant stuff. Although the wine, the bread, and the fish were all material things, Jesus did not come to promise material abundance to everyone. He didn't take a cistern, say a prayer, and make it overflow with money. He did not multiply TVs or shares of stock or cars. The hawkers of the prosperity gospel today interpret abundance this way. But Jesus, like the prophets who had gone before him, preached more about the dangers of material prosperity than about such prosperity being a sign of God's love. So the problems of the gross economic and material inequities of the world do not invalidate the message of this wedding story about the abundance of God's grace. Those problems condemn

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Marcus, Yosef, "What is the significance of the four cups of wine?" CHADBAD.ORG, retrieved from [http://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach\\_cdo/aid/658520/jewish/What-is-the-significance-of-the-four-cups.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/658520/jewish/What-is-the-significance-of-the-four-cups.htm)

humanity far more than God. It is we who allow the inequities to exist by refusing to make equitable distribution of goods and opportunities our highest priority. But as far as today's lesson is concerned, all people have been blessed equally by God's grace in Christ. All people have been given the opportunity to taste and experience God's extravagant love.

So, the question this text raises for me is not about Jesus' attitude or God's blessing distribution system; it is about us. The question is: do we live as those who dwell in and appreciate God's abundance every day, or are we teetotalers when it comes to enjoying the blessings of God and God's grace? Every day we are surrounded by so much beauty. Every day we are offered glasses of grace in the love of friends and family, in the opportunities to wonder, learn, grow, and make a difference. But it is so easy for us to miss it all. Most of us are so busy we hardly know what day it is, and if we do know that, then our lives are all about task lists. "Have I met the deadline? Have I done the shopping? Have I done the laundry, taken the car for an oil change, and mailed the whatever?" Then on top of those lists, we have the weight of the world. Every day the news tells us all the things we should worry about while the advertisers tell us all the things we lack. As a result, to put it in the terms of this story, we can go through our lives focused primarily on the propriety issues of not having enough wine (our obligations to others), or the purity issues (our shortcomings), and miss the joy that is going on around us every single day. The story is about a seven-day party—get it? Every day that the Lord created we can and do dwell in the abundant grace of God we receive through Jesus Christ. But how often do we drink of it?

I'm preaching to myself here as much or more than anyone else because I know that I don't drink enough of this grace. I was reminded of this again when my childhood friend and his daughter were killed by the mudslides in California a couple of weeks ago. He was just a couple of years older than I am. So after he was killed, everything in my life looked different. To be able to hold my child in safety, to talk to family on the phone, to see the late afternoon sunlight through the trees, to laugh, eat, etc.... Everything felt like such a gift. Maybe you've felt this way too sometime after you've lost or almost lost a loved one, or after you've recovered enough from an injury or illness finally to get about and do normal tasks. Suddenly everyday life with all of its mundane challenges seems amazing and wonderful. It's a blessing.

In the beginning of John's gospel, after the Prologue speaks of the Word becoming flesh in Christ, it continues, "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." This is true whether we are rich or poor, healthy or sick, popular or alone. Grace upon grace. Vats of amazing wine overflowing. We cannot live each day in the kind of heightened state of awareness that comes from living in the shadow of death, nor would we want to brush that closely with death every day just to open our eyes. But we can appreciate the abundance more often by adopting what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the spiritual practice of paying attention," by counting our blessings and reminding ourselves every day that we are at a wedding, not a funeral.<sup>3</sup> Take a sip of the good wine by spending time looking at the wonder of nature. If you can't get outside, the new show "Blue Planet II," which has been running on the BBC channel on TV, is amazing. Take another sip by reaching out to a friend, family member, or stranger. Lift

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<sup>3</sup> See Taylor, Barbara Brown, An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 2009), 17-34.

the cup of joy, toast to the blessings in your life. Be as immoderate with your gratitude as God is with divine grace. If we all did this daily, we would discover that our cups are fuller than we realized. We might even recognize that there is more than enough for all of us if we just pass the bottle around. Thanks be to God! Amen.