

## *Turning Water to Wine (the Lord's First Miracle)*

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish

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“Jesus said... ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.’ And they took it....” And the water was made wine (John 2:7-9).

Water as a symbol for truth has many uses. We can drink it, freeze it, wash or cook with it, sail or swim in it, use it as a solvent to mix or separate things, even power machinery with it. Plants and animals can't live without it any more than we can, and everybody knows how important some humidity can be in the air we breathe or circulate around our homes.

Water can be cooling, refreshing, invigorating, nourishing, and certainly is essential for the cleansing of the blood and tissues within the body. (Incidentally one thing few people seem to know is that water often is the most effective antacid you can get; drinking it simply dilutes the offending acids in the stomach and helps the digestive system restore its normal balance.)

Without water we dry up and die. So it is with truth in our minds. We need to **know** a lot of things in order to survive: what's helpful and what's harmful, what's healthy and what's not, how to get along with other people and how to get along without them, how to make a living, how to find fulfillment and meaning, where to go when we're in trouble. If we don't know the basic laws of our environment we are bound to get hurt or sick, and we can get into a lot of trouble in our relationships as well.

But this is just the beginning. Water in the Scriptures corresponds specifically to the truth of spiritual life. So we also need to know about the Lord, the spiritual world, faith, charity, the will and understanding, the process of regeneration, Divine Providence and many other things along these lines. We need to know them so that we can use them, and we can use them, like water, in many different ways.

In the story of the Lord's first miracle the water we read about was stored in 6 large stone jars or pots. It was not for drinking or for cooking, but for washing, specifically for washing the dry dust of Palestine from the feet of visitors or guests as they entered the house. This is the water that the Lord turned into wine, in fact much better wine than the host of the wedding feast had served up to that point.

How did He do it? We don't know. But there is one thing we do know: the miracle required the cooperation of the servants in the house. First they had to fill the waterpots, and then they had to draw some out, and take it to the master of the feast. Maybe the water turned to wine as it filled the jugs. Maybe it did so as they were drawing it out. Maybe it did so as they carried it to the master. The point is that the Lord didn't just “zap” the water, apart from the actions of the men and women in the story, but He did the miracle as they worked with Him, doing His word. This is important, as we'll see, and makes it quite different from the situation where the devil suggested that the Lord should turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:3). In that case the miracle would have been for Himself, to satisfy His own hunger after fasting, and to prove His power apart from any other need. So of course He refused. But in this case the Lord was meeting the needs of a large group, and the fact that it was at a wedding party should be enough to tell us that it had something to do with our eternal life, for

as we read in Matthew (22), the kingdom of heaven is compared to a marriage feast.

But what is the symbolism of the wine? Well, in the normal process we start with grapes, which, as fruit, correspond to the good of life, or charity. But the grapes are juiced, and then in liquid form (like water, but full of nutrients and, typically, some impurities) they correspond to the truth that is derived from good. And what do we mean by this? – an example might be the knowledge or insight you get as a result of doing certain work. There's nothing like hands-on experience for learning new things. And it's the same in spiritual life: when we do what the Lord teaches we receive it more fully and with deeper insight than we possibly could by just memorizing it – which also increases our emotional investment in it, so that the good – or goodness – of it is felt more deeply than before.

But then yeast is added, and the sugars in the juice allow it to grow causing fermentation. Because yeast generally corresponds to falsities which eat away at the truth this process corresponds to the temptations we face when corrupting influences begin to affect us. However the alcohol that the yeast produces as a by-product of its growth is toxic (or we might say, antiseptic) to the fungus itself and so if the process is carefully controlled (in a closed environment) the yeast eventually produces so much alcohol that it kills itself leaving the coarser elements or dregs of the juice to fall down so that the resulting clear and refreshing wine may be siphoned off and enjoyed. This wine now corresponds to the truth of good that has been strengthened and purified by victories in temptations. So it is a symbol for the spirit of the Word, the spiritual sense as distinguished from the literal sense, the understanding of the truth as distinguished from the truth itself.

With this in mind the basic elements of the whole story begin to fall into place. Here was a wedding party in Cana of Galilee. And Jesus and His mother and His disciples were all invited. And they ran out of wine. Now it doesn't say that Mary was in charge of anything, but when she saw that they were out of wine she went to her Son and told Him. But He said, "What does that concern of yours have to do with Me? My time has not yet come," whereupon she told the servants, who must have been aware of the Lord's commanding presence, "Do whatever He tells you to do."

Again, as we know from other lessons, the region of Galilee represents the part of our minds that is receptive and open to instruction. Cana specifically seems to be a name taken from the word for a vessel, or perhaps a basket made of reeds or wicker. So it is that the Lord comes to us when we are open and receptive. We believe also that Mary represents the affection for truth, the longing not only to know but to apply the truth in helpful ways. And just as Mary responds to the need of the people at the feast by speaking to Jesus, so our longing to know and do what is right leads us to the Lord, the source of truth.

But the Lord says, "My hour has not yet come." What does this mean? Although the verses are not explained as such in the Writings it seems clear that the people at the wedding represent the church, and when the people run out of wine the problem being represented is a lack of understanding in the church. This certainly was the situation when the Lord began His ministry in Galilee: the people of the Jewish church knew the truth, that is, they knew the teachings of the Old Testament, and many tried to live by those teachings, but they didn't have any feeling for their spiritual sense. They were simply bound by the obligations of the letter (and also subject to the domination of those who could use the letter of the law to prove their points and get their way) because the nobler Spirit of the law was missing; it had run out.

The Lord asking what all this had to do with Him was in a sense rhetorical, for it had everything to do with Him - not that the spirit of the truth was missing but that He had come to restore and teach it again. He knew they wouldn't fully appreciate it, so He said that His hour had not yet come, but in doing the miracle He showed that He had the power to change their lives if they would co-operate with Him.

And so here we are in the midst of the story. We are the members of a new church that has been invited to enjoy the delights of heaven itself on earth, reveling in the true marriage of love and wisdom through the marvelous insights that the Lord has provided in the spiritual sense of His Word. Here we are at the wedding feast expecting to be provided with all that we can eat and drink. And yet as we participate in the life of the church it's not unusual for us to become disenchanted or to suffer various disappointments. We may start to lose the sense of wonder and excitement that we felt when we discovered the church or when we first fully entered into it. We may let our interest in the doctrines wane or become pre-occupied with personal and organizational problems or external concerns. And then we start to feel empty. We have run out of wine.

Suddenly it seems the party's over. And it's a sad thing! The life of the church to a large extent is the spirit of the truth working in our relationships and responsibilities. It is the joy and fulfillment of understanding and participating in the marriage of what is good and true from the Lord through His Word. But if the spirit of that truth is lacking, what's the point? We might as well go home. In our world today we can watch religion on TV, or we can just read about it, or we can seek and find it in some other circle of friends outside the church.

But in the story the mother of the Lord comes to Him with the problem. The affection for truth, the longing that we all have within us for the joy of that fulfillment, "speaks" to Him hoping that He will do something to restore the sense of life and purpose. So we, too, may pray that the Lord will help us in our disillusionment and restore the joy of involvement in the church.

But how? What does the Lord say? In the story He points to the six large, stone jugs in the courtyard of the house - near the entrance - and tells the servants to fill them with water. Then He tells them to draw some out, and take it to the master of the feast.

Now here is an improbable scene. The water in those jugs was for purification, for washing hands and feet as people came in from outside. But these people were inside already. Why should they go back to where they started? Or if they had water to pour why did they have to pour it into those jugs instead of having it turn into wine right away?

Well, the answer is that the water could not become wine apart from this process. And what is the process within us? In a sense it is a return to basics; it is a commitment to refill the reservoirs and refresh the memories of the simple truths of the Word that have been given to us for the cleansing of our lives. Remember there were six waterpots, each one of two or three "firkins" (about 20 or 30 gallons). "Six" is a number that reminds us of the labor of creation, and therefore a full state of preparation for the influx of life from the Lord. "Two or three" (much like 20 or 30) reminds us of all the goods and truths that we learn from the Word as we enter into the life of the church. And the "servants" represent all the lower truths or thought processes that take orders from the will and conscience above.

So what we have here is the astounding, actually miraculous suggestion that we can get real spiritual fulfillment from the simple work of reformation, the preparation of our minds to wash and cleanse the externals of our lives so that we are free of the dust and dirt that may come in from all our worldly concerns. What we have is the principle of knowledge, faith and obedience as the starting point for all Divine miracles, the willingness to learn what the Word teaches and to apply it in the simple rituals of courtesy and hospitality and kindness and friendship and acceptance of others.

And in our case we have the special responsibility of learning new and deeper truths from the Lord than He has ever revealed to people before.

Of course, even these truths of doctrine and of the spiritual sense are still just bits of knowledge, like water in a jug, until we draw them out and put them to work. But if we do so as the Lord directs, then out of this reservoir of knowledge and experience, with His help we will also draw the deeper insights, the rich, rewarding and refreshing insights of spiritual life that are full of all the complex, varietal flavors of the vineyard that is the Lord's church.

The acknowledgment of Providence, the Writings say, is nothing if it doesn't include the acknowledgment that it works in the smallest details of everything. And "small" in our experience may also mean the seemingly insignificant things. But one lesson that the Lord teaches us in this first of all His miracles is that true spiritual life is gained first of all through very natural and external commitments. What is it the Buddhists say? - "If you want to be enlightened, cut wood, or fetch water." So in the Writings we learn that filling the water jugs and then drawing out from them represents the commitment to serve, to live according to the things we know, to act, to do, to use the principles of truth in our own lives so that the Lord can flow into these things and transform even the most ordinary routines into opportunities to feel the delight of heaven.

Water is truth. Wine is the spirit of truth. We can't have the latter without the former. Nor will the knowledge of the Word become the wisdom of life until we put it to work. But when we do, with the Lord's help a most amazing miracle can take place, so that no matter how unfulfilled we may have felt we can return to the celebration of life inspired and renewed in faith.

Amen.

Lessons: I Kings 9-10: selections  
Children's talk on Solomon's Wisdom

John 2:1-12  
Apocalypse Explained #376:29